

BREAKFAST AT BUCK'S TALES FROM THE PANCAKE GUY



**BY
JAMIS MACNIVEN**

What they've said about The Pancake Guy and Buck's of Woodside

"He's the Bill Graham of our time, not to mention the Zsa Zsa Gabor."

Andy Serwer, Fortune

"Whenever I want to know how the American economy is going, I ring my friend Jamis MacNiven in California's Silicon Valley." *Conor O'Cleary, Newsweek.*

"The place to see and be seen." *Time Magazine*

"Ground zero for high-tech power brokers." *Nick Wingfield, Wall Street Journal*

"Impresario of the power breakfast." *Rob Morse, San Francisco Chronicle*

"Good food and an owner who will make fun of you."

Holly Finn, Financial Times of London

"Closest thing I've seen to an American eccentric." *Amanda Hall, Sunday Telegraph*

"Bei mir wurde das Internet erfunden sagt der Bestazer Jamis MacNiven."

Von Michler, Die Welt

"Buck's serves as the Valley's Four Seasons." *Johu Heilmann, New Yorker*

"You never know who you're going to see and what connections you're going to make (at Buck's)." *Michael Bauer, San Francisco Chronicle*

"A philosopher." *Duncan Campbell, Manchester Guardian*

"Buck's restaurant of Woodside is Silicon Valley's equivalent of Morton's of West Hollywood." *New York Times*

"Buck's of Woodside is ground zero for the new economy." *Nikkei (Japan)*

"Flamboyant patron de Buck's, Jamis MacNiven." *Le Monde*

"Buck's is a bizarre site for a famous business experience." *Emerce (Holland)*

"Unique insights into the American Economy." *Conor O'Cleary, Irish Times*

"Buck's is a popular VC hangout." *Namita Devindayal, Times of India*

"The world's next millionaires eat lunch and make deals at Buck's."

Gary Andrew Poole, New York Times

"MacNiven sees nothing but upside ahead." *Paul Andrews, US News & World Report*

"Jamis has the perfect rap." *Paul Buotin, Wired Magazine*

"The owner, the food and the environment is larger than life."

Meny Magazine (Sweden)

"If you are starting a business in Silicon Valley at least tell everyone you did it at Buck's whether you did or not." *Panorama Magazine (Italy)*

"Buck's decor is surreal." *Mark Sappenfeld, Christian Science Monitor*

"Over the top." *Zagat*

The Clicksters
Jamis MacNiven

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by Jamis MacNiven

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Dedicated to
The Sultan of Brunei



The second most fun guy on earth

“Life is too important to be taken seriously”

Oscar Wilde

“Nobody’s normal”

Dave Barry

Notes:

1. The word ‘internet’ will not be capitalized unless it appears at the beginning of a sentence.
2. God may or may not be capitized depending on which god.
3. No Canadians have been intentionally injured in the making of this book.

BREAKFAST AT BUCK'S

TALES FROM THE PANCAKE GUY

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i'ro·ny, *n.* Spending half your time worrying about being found out
and the other half writing your autobiography.

THE SULTAN OF BRUNEI?

Why, you might ask, would I dedicate this book to the Sultan of Brunei?

Well, the Sultan is the man who has spent more money having a good time than anyone else in the great sweep of human history. We're talking tens of billions of dollars here. And where is Brunei? It shares a fence line with Borneo, of course. The Sultan really likes living large. His palace has 1,788 rooms, which makes Buckingham look like a phone booth. It has a big yard for his kids to play in. No six-foot wading pool and rickety jungle gym here. The back yard is actually a billion-dollar theme park and all the neighborhood kids get to play there too, all free, natch.

Years ago, the Saudi Prince Ben al Fassi, an acquaintance of the Sultan's, bought a mansion on Sunset Boulevard right next to the Beverly Hills Hotel. Al Fassi thought it would be amusing to paint the Greek and Roman statues that populated the vast lawns vibrant pink and lavender, highlighting certain anatomical parts in contrasting colors. These statues could be seen quite clearly from the hotel. The management was less than thrilled; they complained. No problem. The Sultan bought the hotel and the complaining stopped. Hey, thanks buddy! Then the locals found out the Sultan planned to turn the hotel into a house. The citizens stormed the place with torches and pitchforks. "Oh, sorry," said the Sultan. "I'll just put 30 million into a renovation and keep it as a hotel."

This is one all-right guy in my book.

I know that I don't spend as much money as the Sultan, but I'm having every bit as much fun as he is. Every day, hundreds of the most interesting people in the world walk through the door of my restaurant and when they leave, they actually pay *me*. We're a down-home, American-style neighborhood joint but the food is just part of the experience. Once an online Japanese magazine featured a review of Buck's and, when I shoved it into the translator, it came out as mostly gibberish except for a simple statement which actually summed us up perfectly. In the middle of the pile, I discovered the precise definition of Buck's. It read: "The interior of Buck's is a toy box entirely." And it *is* a toy box, jammed full of stuff I have built, bought or stolen and, like some cosmic card game with an infinite set of face cards, the people keep changing.

A man came in one afternoon sporting well-worn cowboy boots, bowlegs and a polished metal nose. He said that a badger had bitten off his real nose when he was a kid. He told me that people got used to the

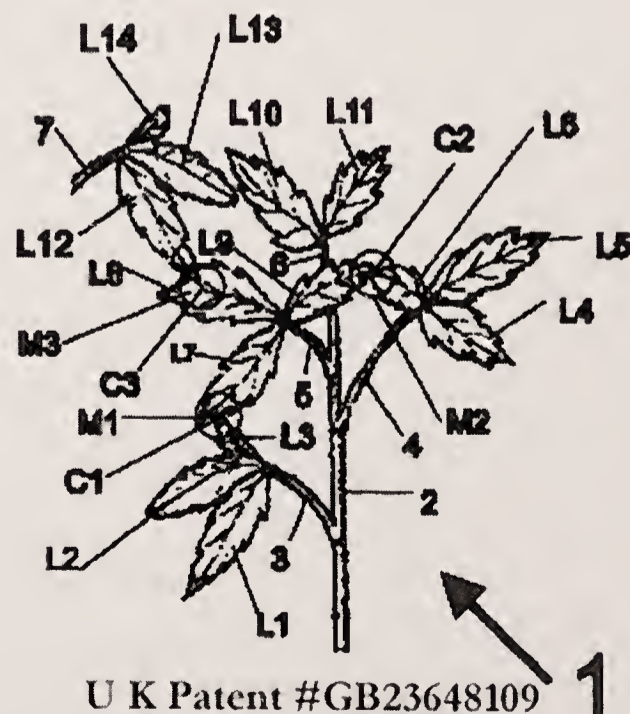
metal one real fast, but a flesh-toned one scared them silly. One busy Friday night, a friend of mine drove four alpacas through the front door, ran them around the restaurant and out the back. A few minutes later, Chelsea Clinton showed up for dinner with the Secret Service in tow. Not long ago, the two-week-old Brandenburg twins dropped by. At the same time, a 102-year-old woman was having breakfast. Now that's what I call a vertical market! I've been bear-hugged by Shimon Peres, poked in the chest by the head of the Russian Army, sneered at by Sharon Stone and kicked in the shin by Mini-Me.

Business people meet at Buck's planning startups and mergers and pouring millions into new companies. Others meet and launch mergers of a different sort and end up married with kids. In fact, the staff are allowed to date the customers and each other and several have gotten married. Oh, no more mouths to feed! Darn!

Buck's is located in Woodside, California, an Old West logging town. A single school, one church, the grocery store, hardware store, and hitch racks all over town because a few people really do get around on horseback.

But this book isn't just about Buck's. It's about money, love, sex, and death. I'll tell you what it's like to run from the FBI and give you an insider's look at what caused the collapse of the internet dream. I'll rave about religion, pontificate about physics, advise on cows, and tell you what I know about: kids, zebras, counterfeiters, cool geezers in their 90s, cowboys, lunatics, billionaires, lunatic billionaires, Nobel Prize winners, Academy Award winners, pie-eating contest winners, train wrecks (3), diving with great white sharks (3), stalking both Zsa Zsa Gabor and President Putin, and, of course, the Great Bra Ball War.

When I first started writing this, I thought I would have to make a lot of stuff up, but the real world is overflowing with things like giant squid, trombones, astrologers and tornadoes; all far more interesting than anything I could ever invent. For instance: in this universe, indeed in the part of the universe we call England, patent #GB23648109 has been issued to Brian Wybrow. It seems that Brian noticed that certain petrified leaves from fossilized trees have fine wavy lines on them. Brian speculated that the spines of adjacent leaves had etched the surface of the leaves next to them and



prehistoric, phonograph-like recordings of dinosaurs roaring have no doubt resulted. Makes sense. In fact, it makes *perfect* sense that he would take out a patent for the purpose of...well...for...the exact reason for patenting this escaped me, so I called Brian up and asked him why. “Simple.” He told me that filing a patent was a “brilliant” way to impress women. “Oh right, Brian. Brilliant!” How could I have missed that?

I often appear to be laughing at nothing. But it isn’t nothing, really. For instance, dogs sitting behind the steering wheels of cars. You just know the furry bum is thinking about making a run for it. Or ponder the improbable nature of high heels (clack, clack, clack), or why every guy driving a Corvette has a mustache. Or lapels on coats. Lapels are funny, sure, but we also have Prozac for depressed house cats, Hugh Hefner and The Playboy Lifestyle, and nuclear missiles called ‘peacekeepers.’ Or how about the doomsday cult in France called the Lighthouse? Their leader, Arnaud Mussy, wears really ghastly cable knit sweaters and smiles a lot. Well he should be smiling; he has convinced some of his followers to give him all of their money and then jump off the roofs of tall buildings to avoid the rush to the door when the world goes out of business. Or how about Bijan on Rodeo Drive, Mr. Trendista himself, who sells little pistols caked with diamonds for \$98,000. And then there are The Mormons.



All this, and none of this stuff is even *supposed* to be funny.

Now that you know that the Sultan is my great hero, I’ll level with you: I wrote this book strictly for the money. I’ve read about monkeys who scuba dive, I’ve traveled to the far corners of the earth and I’ve met so many astonishing people that I thought I would slap it all in a book, sell a few million of them and buy a new Aston Martin. A convertible. If this doesn’t work out, I’ll just jack up the prices at Buck’s and buy one anyway.

Since you and I are pals now, I want to ask you to do me one little favor, OK? The next time you’re in a bookstore, look for this book and sign my name to all the copies. It makes them unreturnable and it will also make you feel a wee bit wicked. Hey, don’t worry. I’ll back you up if they catch you. In fact, I suggest that you sign all sorts of books, especially the classics. It’s like crossbreeding show dogs. It drives the purists nuts but it’s fun for the rest of us, and isn’t it all about the fun?

Chapter 1.

LOOSE NUTS

Skin in the Game

When I was a kid I made a solemn vow to my grandfather that when I grew up I would be a success like him and not a bum like my no-good father. If my grandfather hadn't died before he could pass on his wisdom, I might have been able to keep that promise.

I have a vivid memory of the old gentleman sitting by the pool at a snitzy country club somewhere in the California desert. I had just come shivering from the water and he came at me with a huge fluffy towel emblazoned with a stiff gold monogram that made me think it had been copied from a general's uniform, so unlike the borrowed motel towels we used at home. Grampa took my head in his large smooth hands and dried my hair. He cupped my face and drew it close to his, turning my head slightly as if to find a way to see in and make me understand as he said, "Just remember, Jocko, keep some skin in the game, always keep some skin in the game, Jocko." Grampa's cheeks were wet and he hadn't even been in the pool. Time stood still for a moment. I could smell his brown thumb, scented and tanned by the sweet tobacco he was endlessly ramming into his meerschaum pipe, carved in what I took to be the shrunken skull of an unlucky jungle explorer. I could smell the gin and mint on his breath and see the fine red lines criss-crossing his nose looking like a subway map of hell itself.

I loved and dreaded these encounters. Being manhandled by a teary old souse is gross, even by a guy claiming to be your grandfather, but it paid well because he was never too far gone to make a silver dollar materialize from thin air and give it to me. How the hell, though, was a seven-year-old kid supposed to figure out what "skin in the game" meant? Plus my name was never Jocko. Grampa was a crook, always on the con; cheating at cards, peddling quack medical devices or arranging for insurance lightning. Well, Grampa, I've run a straight game and a crooked one and I can tell you this: a straight game is easier, it pays better and you can hide right out in public. Skin in the game indeed. What terrible advice you old flim-flammer!



big al

I guess Buck's might have remained an unknown small town joint if the boom of the '90s in Silicon Valley hadn't happened. But it did. It was a time when the wine flowed like money at 600 bucks a bottle. Some web site addresses sold for millions making others, like www.hey-im-overhere.com, seem cheap at only 11 grand. Billboard prices along the freeways spiked at about \$50,000 a month so one enterprising soul mounted a billboard on a barge and towed it with a tugboat along 101 on the Bay.

Our house cats demanded caviar and our pet snakes ate minks. One local fella built a house, which, although far smaller, cost more than The White House. It was simply nuts. Of course, we faced real dilemmas like anyone else. "Should I take the Mercedes or the Ferrari to Pebble Beach?" In Silicon Valley we were at once so down tone and hip that we ended up in *GQ* in our own clothes. New York, L.A. and London with their 'Silicon Gulches,' 'Silicon Alleys' and the like tried to copy The Valley but we were so Elvis they couldn't get near us.

Venture Capitalist Hopes Fun Restaurant Will Be Hub for Techies

Project Aims to Emulate Silicon Valley's Buck's in Hong Kong

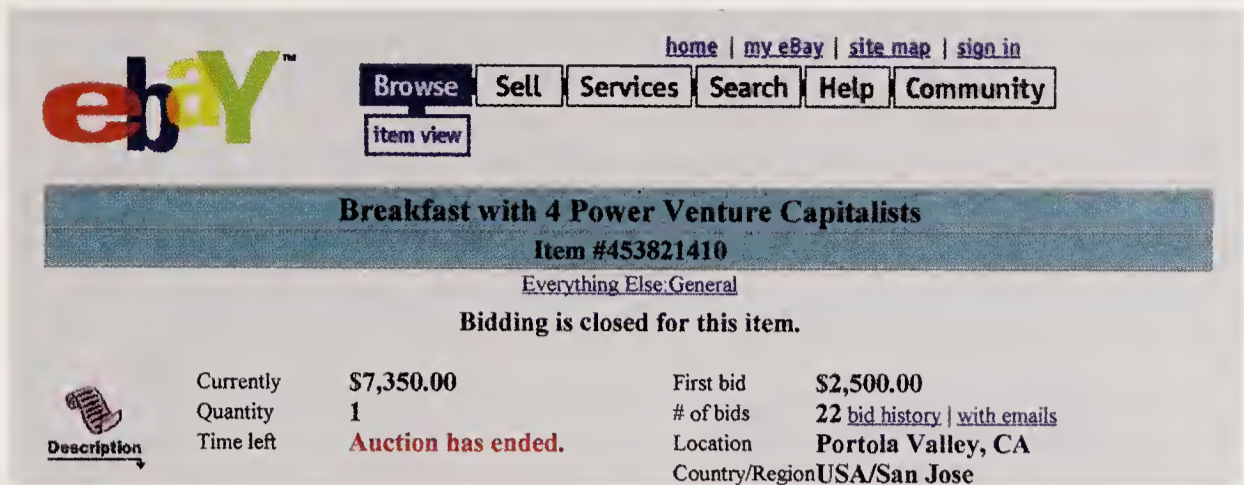
from the hong kong wall street journal, 1998

The press was on hand to record every burble and burp of this new baby and once the domestic media markets became saturated, the international press picked the story up and it would morph and the cycle began all over again. Journalists poured into The Valley and inevitably ended up at our little podunk restaurant in a strip center between the hardware store and the tennis shop.

The event that has brought so much attention to Buck's is the fabled meeting between the venture capitalist and the technology entrepreneur.

Venture Capitals as a Commodity

The venture capitalists themselves became such hot properties that meetings with them were auctioned on eBay. The idea was breakfast with a VC at Buck's and the money raised would go to charity. In June of 1999 the first VC breakfast sold for \$9,400 and helped establish the online charity auction. A year later the price fell to \$7,350 for four of them at once. Even I got auctioned but I only went for two grand. Phooey! Now we've all had to go back to work for a living.



Over time, business folk mistook me for someone of influence and I would be asked to sit in on the pitch. I have heard several hundred. Some pitches are tossed by some players who have spent way too much time in dreamland but many are proposed by scientists, engineers and business people who have become smashing successes, reshaping the very world around us. I've been lucky enough to sit with the inventors of the microchip, personal computer, *The* internet, the mouse, and the mountain bike. I've met the folks who brought us the first space suit,



buck's is basically a dump taking all the loose nuts who have rolled through Buck's front door because their stuff is far more interesting than a computer chip which is smaller and faster. Bring on the indoor abalone farms and people who run their cars on French fry oil. Hurray for self-lighting cigarettes. Yes, to the guy crossing America on stilts.

the angioplasty heart surgery balloon, and the young upstarts from Napster, which drove the first nail into the coffin of the music business. I've met Mr. Spock and Dr. Spock (although on different occasions). At Buck's we see the honchos from eBay, Google, Oracle, Hewlett-Packard and the rest but it's the offbeat, wacky businesses to which I gravitate.

When I create my new planet, I'm



An acquaintance called one evening as I was leaving to watch my son Rowan play football. Rowan had just come back after a ten-week injury to play the last football game of his high school career and I really wanted to go to the game. My friend on the phone insisted that her husband had to see me right away. The proposal they had could not

possibly wait until morning. "I'm not a venture capitalist," I patiently explained, "or a fixer, a banker or an angel investor. I make pancakes for a living."

"Never mind all that," she assured me. "We'll meet you at the game. It will just take a minute."

Half an hour later, I was standing in front of the high school in the rain under the marquee where I could hear the announcer in the distance, "Another spectacular tackle by Number 46, Rowan MacNiven!" I waited, shifting my weight from foot to foot, trying to keep warm. Finally, they drove up and my friend's husband thrust a meaty proposal at me. It was about the size and weight of the M volume of the Britannica. He suggested I give him a million dollars for the development of a new armor-piercing shotgun shell.



"Something increasingly necessary in the number 46 darkening international climate," he explained. "Imagine a shotgun shell with a spread at 200 yards, no bigger than your fist!"

"Imagine," I said.

The announcer in the background boomed, "Another quarterback sack by number 46, Rowan MacNiven!"

"Thank you, thank you," I said as I backed away.

Just then Rowan broke his collarbone again, forever ending his football career.

Once they start pitching the pancake guy, people are clearly out of other options. Some of these folks are probably real business people with solid ideas but none immediately come to mind. I like collecting the wacky proposals but these people really *are* nuts if they think that I can do anything for them. My investments are so notoriously bad that if I take a piece of your deal, you have an ironclad guarantee of not only a zero percent return but also the knowledge that your principal will vaporize faster than a snowball in the Sudan. One venture capitalist called me "Typhoid MacNiven" and marveled at my uncanny ability to roll the dice and come up with two blank faces.

And they keep on coming.

You too can meet Pat Boone!

I was both mortified and enchanted by one fellow who came into my office and told me he had "the very thing" and that all he needed from me was three million. He had an internet solution that purported to be able to "wire-up" all the college alums ever born like so many bales of hay. I explained that I was just in the restaurant business but he ignored

me and mowed forward like a sharecropper trying to outrun the rain. This guy had a really sharp suit on, which is an oddity at Buck's because folks are more likely to be dressed in khakis and blue work shirts. He tempered his dapperness with white suede shoes. I half expected a top hat and cane but the shoes by themselves made me pretty happy. I told him that I could get him a cup of coffee but I couldn't get him the three mill. He then put all his wood behind one arrow and, with the grin of an insider, he told me that he knew *Pat Boone* and that *Pat Boone* was in his corner 110 percent. *If* I played my cards right he might, just might, introduce me to the fabled crooner primarily remembered for wearing those same white shoes and beating unsuspecting teenagers over the head with sappy songs about puppies and Jesus. Even I was sorely pressed to continue with this fellow, so I answered my non-ringing phone and, covering the mouthpiece, told him I had Satan on the line with a truckload of badly used souls and bid him goodbye. Later that morning I found a blizzard of photocopied, hand-written proposals littering the windshields of the cars in the parking lot. They promised "the possibility" that, for just three million dollars, they could meet Pat Boone.

I knew we had hit high water when Nan from Nome came in a few days later. Nan Ommo was of the Eskimo persuasion although he had grown up in South Florida. He used to be a drag boat racer and a nightclub owner. He once sold a yacht to the Shah of Iran that had three lapis lazuli bathtubs, two elevators and one helipad. All this I learned in the first 30 seconds. Nan was about 5'3", in diameter. He wore a spherical pinstriped suit with a cravat and matching pocket hankie. Both of his blunt pinkies sported what looked like fake Super Bowl diamond rings and his mouth was an awe-inspiring dazzle of gold teeth. In his pudgy paw he clutched a business plan the size of the Chicago phone book. He told me that what he had was going to be bigger than Amazon. The proposal certainly was.

I forget what Nan's great idea was, but his technique was vintage Miami Beach. He had copies of the *Red Herring*, *Business 2.0* and *The Industry Standard* magazines and had tagged the pages with pictures of venture capitalists. He sat near the door and when he spotted someone he could identify, he leaped on them like a dog on a leg and slapped them with one of his gigantic proposals. His attack was as fast as a process server's and before I realized what was happening, there were at least half a dozen of his proposals drifting around the restaurant. I collared him and, as gently as I could, told him not to pee in my pool. He said he understood and flashed me a glittering gold smile that made me wince. Like a proverbial bad penny, he was back the next day. This time I caught Nan chasing a well known businessman across the parking lot. I caught up to him and, as I grabbed my little round friend

by the tie, Nan's target beat a hasty retreat.

Nan was a sweet guy, so blindly optimistic, and such a genuine oddball that I hated to stop him, but I explained that if he went after another of my customers I would hang him from the bridge by his belt and let the buzzards peck his eyes out. He sort of sagged in my grip at this news and asked meekly if at least he could finish his breakfast. "Sure," I said, "I'll even buy." When you think about it, he just came into town to ride the whirlwind. Who could blame him? He was funny, original and even if he knew nothing about nothing I liked his style.

Despite the shaky deals, real blockbusters swirled all around. Of course, I had no idea which ones they were. One morning Steve Jurvetson, one of the leading lights of the venture capital community, came in and met a fellow named Sabeer Bhatia. Sabeer had an idea. A really, really big idea, but one so simple that he was reluctant to tell anyone about it because he wanted to roll it out without competition. He needed backing, however, and he and Steve hit it off, so he whispered into Steve's ear: "free email." With this, Hotmail was launched and in a few months Microsoft bought the name for 400 million. Ka-ching!

A slow news day in Tokyo

Steve and Sabeer met for the first time at table 15. A couple of years later, when CNN did a story about the event, Steve and Sabeer recreated the scene. After the exuberance of the '90s there was some sort of residual cosmic background radiation reverberating and foreign TV crews still came in trying to do the same old story about the internet revolution. The VC's had long since run for cover and when TV Tokyo came by, the best I could do for them was let them shoot a video, of a still picture, of the recreation, of the founding of Hotmail.



Some incidents stand out clearly in black and blue, illustrating how differently people see the world. One afternoon I was sitting in a booth at Buck's with a Canadian composer who told me that he wrote music for video games and was waiting to meet a music producer from L.A. to talk about a deal. It turns out that there is big money in this business; in 2002 the video game industry passed motion pictures in dollar volume. The composer was an unlikely blend of Nova Scotia small-towner and rock n' roll hipster, so we were having a lively discussion when the producer showed up. He wore a \$3,000 sport coat and crocodile shoes. He was all capped teeth and crapola, believing that his trip to the uncharted lands of the microchip was pretty exotic.

I happened to be planning an exotic trip myself. Knowing my very pressing need to pack-lite, my wife had given me a full-sized keyboard that accordions into a unit the size of a wallet. Attach a Palm Pilot and you have a lightweight, full-featured word processing system.

As I held the keyboard I said to the two men, "It's remarkable, is it not, that all the books ever written, all the books being written and all the books yet to be written are right here in this keyboard."



The composer nodded. There was a momentary silence. Then the producer's eyes widened and seemed to bulge from his head. "Wow! Man!" he exclaimed. "I can't f***** believe it. This is just so f***** incredible, just f***** in-cre-di-ble!" He looked at the keyboard with absolute awe. I'm not used to being taken quite so seriously but I had really made an impression on this guy. And he still wasn't finished. "I can't believe how f***** small things have gotten," he gushed. "Remarkable. Just f***** remarkable. "

Then he asked if he could hold it, and I handed it to him. He held it reverently, as if it was a Fabergé egg, and turned it over slowly in his hands, carefully examining it from all sides. "So, where are they, man?" he asked.

"Where are what?" I said, re-measuring the guy.

"The books, man. The books."

"Ahhhh...where are the books? Yes, the books... Well, I mean it metaphorically; ahhh... figuratively. You know....man?" I added weakly.

The producer handed back the keyboard with a snort. He held out both his hands as if to push me and all abstractions as far from him as possible and said, "Hey, man, I'm in the music business. I have no idea what you're talking about."



Among the most unforgettable of the colorful characters is Memoryman. Memoryman was trying to find Buck's one day using *only* a cell phone, a map and road signs. The road signs seemed to be purposely trying to confuse him and he called several times. I finally brought him in for a landing by standing out in front and waving. He came to roost in a booth with a woman he introduced first as wife, then later as his girlfriend and finally as the woman whose couch he was sleeping on. Memoryman runs at you with what sounds like a tape recording of the highlights of his life. He told me he could remember long strings of numbers or anything else I cared to throw at him and recite it back to me. He could also give it all back in reverse.

He told us how, years ago, he had finally wrangled a spot on *The Phil Donahue Show*. At the time he was peddling his taped memory course and this was to be his big break. Unfortunately, a crippling terror came over him in the green room, and he drank the top half of a bottle of scotch and went before the audience of millions as a stumbling drunk. Though the incident had occurred 20 years earlier, it stung as if it had happened that morning. Memoryman had since built an empire in his roomy mind, which included a comic book with Memoryman as a superhero, an online portal (which would drive Yahoo! offstage, he told us) and a vigorous lecture tour.

At his insistence, we tried him out with 50 random digits and darned if he couldn't log them in and spill them out, forward and backwards. It just so happened that the advance team from one of the networks was in that day, finalizing plans for a live broadcast of the two-hour show from Buck's the following week. I introduced Memoryman to them and they said they would give him a spot. He performed well on the show, having long since sworn off the grape and grain. The problem is that the feat isn't too convincing on TV, because you can't tell if it's rigged or not.

Apparently the performance was enough to convince at least one ravenous investor to back him in his plan for world conquest because he gave Memoryman \$20,000. This came in handy for renting cars and staying in pricey hotels. Then, *poof!* He was gone, and I was left to deal with the angry investor who wondered where his money went. I never introduce people in business for precisely this reason. Memoryman gave me 10,000 or maybe even 100,000 shares of his company. Whenever he needs money he simply prints more stock and goes knocking on doors. I just hope he remembers where he has been. Memoryman calls me every now and then and assures me that my shares are already worth millions.



Business-wise, the most significant thing that ever happened at Buck's was in 1994 when some VC's got together with some engineers and dreamed up Netscape while I fed them pancakes. Netscape was the first browser that allowed easy access to the vastness of human knowledge. It also led to the insanity of the runaway stock market. Jim Clark, the founder, had a mega yacht under construction and needed to make a payment so he pushed the securities underwriters to go public before the company showed any returns. They launched the stock, not unlike a half-finished yacht itself, and shaazam! It zoomed from zero to \$2.6 billion. Wow! A billion here, a billion there and pretty soon you're talking about real money.

"Was that popping sound
more Champagne er what?"

The balloon floated merrily along for about five years, until the first big venture capital player said, "I fold." Fold? You can't fold! In 1999, John Mumford of Crosspoint Venture Partners raised a new fund of a billion dollars (a million ain't what it used to be but a billion still is) for investing in high-tech ventures. He took the pulse of the market and couldn't find a place to put the money. So he said to the investors in the new fund: "Forget it — here's your money back." John felt that he simply had *'too much money.'*

There were storm warnings before this but most of us ignored them. Now, Buck's is not just a restaurant; we are also the smallest bookstore in the world. We carry one title at a time and I review the book on my menu cover. The requirement is that it be penned by a friend and that it have a flattering page about me (now increased to three flattering pages and a picture). *The Internet Bubble* was written by Michael and Tony Perkins of *The Red Herring* magazine fame. For years, *The Red Herring* was the number one high-tech investor's magazine. The name itself means 'to present one thing, but mean another.' It seems I'm not the only one in the irony biz. So Michael and Tony wrote this book that explained the fact that the internet stock market was built on fantasy, infatuation and greed. They included a list of about a hundred stocks that they absolutely guaranteed would collapse. I read the pre-publication galley, which didn't include the list, so I figure that they owe a half a million or so. Pay up, guys.

Remember day traders? Finding one now is like finding someone who voted for Nixon. Sure, the internet economy collapsed but so did the gold mining industry, which lit the place up back in 1849. The trick was not to get caught in the actual gold business. Leland Stanford sold

picks and shovels, Levi Strauss sold blue jeans and some long forgotten fool no doubt sold pancakes.

And what became of the armor-piercing shotgun shells? That company turned out to be a winner. Damn!



michael pritchard contemplates
the future

Chapter 2.

YAHOO!

OOPS, SORRY!

For the very first time I will reveal what really caused the internet stock market to vaporize. Like Poor Richard's want of a nail, the genesis of the collapse is laughably inconsequential.

At the close of the 20th century in Silicon Valley, we were thinking so far out of the box that when we felt the first drops rain on our parade, we just shrugged and never even turned around to see a reversal of fortunes the size of a forty-story tsunami about to swamp us. Thank dog I'm in it for the laughs, because that's all we have left.

Terms like the 'butterfly effect' and 'the tipping point' have both been bandied about to sell books in airports. The butterfly effect concerns a tiny flap flap of wings on one side of the world that initiates a chain of events leading to a hurricane on the opposite side of the world. The tipping point, from the book by that name, is a long treatise restating what Aesop said more concisely, "The straw that broke the camel's back." To these we can add the 'Zsa Zsa Effect.' This is a phenomenon where serious people mistake others as 'players' when really they are only famous for being famous. The problem is that if you put a Zsa Zsa in charge of anything big you can be sure it will run amok.

Blame

You don't yell at that poor little butterfly for flapping its wings in Tokyo (or is it Kyoto?) and causing the hurricane in Miami any more than you blame that collapsing earth dam on a single gopher, do you?

Well, I guess the gopher actually was responsible for the collapse of the Grand Teton Dam. If you want someone to blame for the internet stock market collapse, blame me, if it makes you feel better. Oh, but save some righteous indignation for the media. It's always a good policy to blame the messenger.



But before I discuss the end in further detail, I should tell you about the beginning: at Buck's, of course, where they say it all started...

On September 14th, 1992, Bob Metcalfe was the first to report that there was something up at Buck's in his *InfoWorld* column. Wow! Have to find a frame for that one. Bob mentioned that he was having a "power breakfast" at Buck's back when power breakfast was still a fresh statement. Bob is one of the major cheeses of tech with 3Com and then Ethernet. He predicted that the expansion of the internet could not keep up its blistering pace and was due for a fall. The internet frenzy kept growing like a tick on steroids and, in a public display of humility, Bob agreed to eat his hat. He had just taken a bite out of the brim when things started to unwind and he turned out to be right after all.

The second time Buck's was mentioned in the press I reverently cut that one out too. It was in *The Economist* from England. A-mazing! Then, between 1992 and 1997, three TV crews came in to shoot interviews and invent some news. From 1998 through 2001, there were 151 more. The trickle of notoriety turned into a rivulet and in no time it looked like the Johnstown Flood. After the first dozen, I began to ritually tally-mark them on the wall. There was no way to keep track of the print journalists, but I've spoken to at least 600 and I know there were plenty of others.

When the press came in I was generally moseying about the restaurant, being a loud and colorful guy. Like the understudy waiting for his Big Break, I was ready to take center stage and spout pithy bits of memorable nonsense while my betters actually tried to make coherent statements. When a TV station takes the time to set up an interview and sends out three or four people for a shoot, the producer never says to the subject: "Just say two or three short sentences of a very general nature, because we'll toss the rest out anyway." No. He smiles engagingly and lets you ramble on and on and on, because this is you on TV and he knows how unhappy you'll be if they only stay for the minute and twenty seconds they'll actually use.

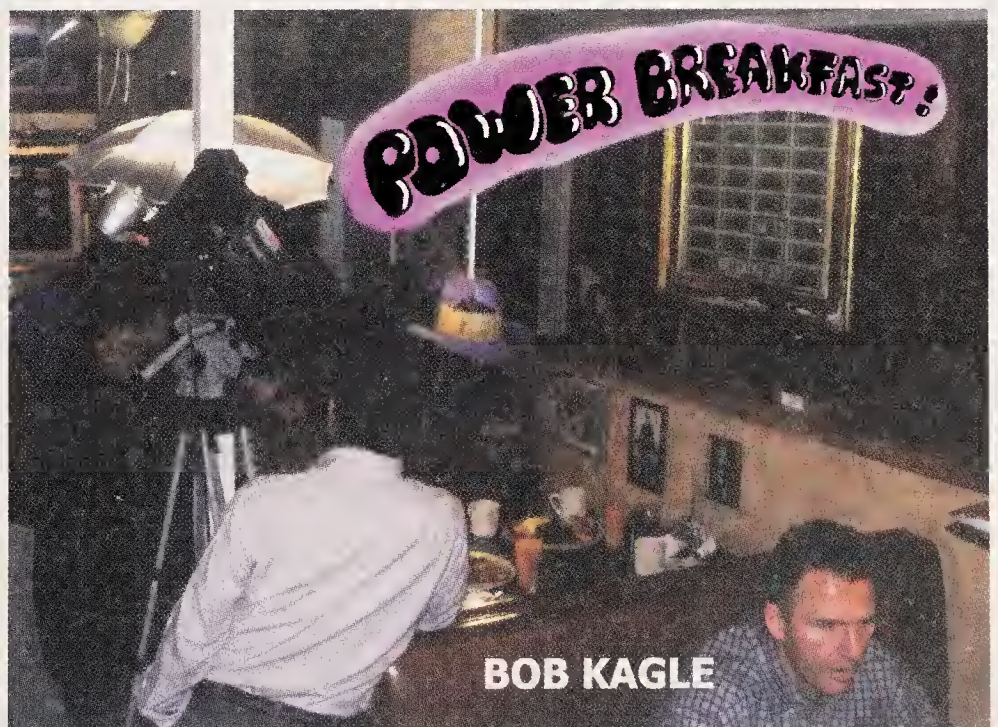
The TV thing was so frenzied by 1999 that controlling it became a big part of my job. We had as many as three crews a day. On one occasion, CNN and NBC both showed up while the editors of *The Washington Post* were having lunch, so I just sat them all together and they interviewed each other. Talk about news making.

CBS came in and broadcast *Power Lunch* with Bill Griffiths, live, for 4 hours one morning. That was the day we had about 500,000 for lunch, a lot even for Buck's. John Chambers of Cisco and many leading lights from venture capital and the cyber biz trooped across the stage for their minute-twenty. When it was my turn, Bill asked me what I thought

was the most significant thing that had ever happened at Buck's. For once I was too serious. I wanted to say it was the time the woman showed us her new breast augmentation by lifting up her shirt on a busy Friday night, but instead I said that it was the fact that Netscape was founded at Buck's. "That isn't what Mark Andreessen says," Bill frowned. I countered with a dismissive wave. "You know, Bill," I said, "he hadn't been hired yet."

Power Lunch involved so many people and so much equipment that it was hard to maneuver through the room with an armload of omelets. They brought in a crew of at least 25 people who blacked out the windows, built a stage, and surrounded the place with about eight large trucks, which gummed up everything quite nicely. All this made it hard for the local folks to get in for breakfast, so after the *Power Lunch* program we pulled the plug and I promised everyone that we would do no more live TV. And we haven't. I'm glad I made that decision, because shortly thereafter *Good Morning America* started putting the screws to me and their advance people came in three times to try to cut a deal. They were a little mad at me for refusing, but being a local joint for the neighborhood is more important than talk shows.

The foreign TV crews were always the most amusing. One day a crew from Asahi, a leading network in Japan, arrived with a crew of five. They brought a cameraman, sound technician, producer, correspondent and someone who doubled as a light technician and food stylist. Generally, the Japanese crews have someone aboard who speaks excellent English. This bunch was an exception. I don't speak Japanese, so it was a little hard to make out exactly what they wanted to do, but they repeatedly mentioned the "power breakfast." I got them set up at a large table and asked if they would like something to eat. The producer kept saying "power breakfast, power breakfast." I ordered several different dishes. They were delighted. For the next two hours, they shot the food from all angles and the correspondent kept up a rapid-fire blow-by-blow as they posed with forks. At one point, one of them whipped out a tape measure to show how impossibly huge the



high voltage flapjacks!

pancakes were. Before they left, they asked us to box up the uneaten food. We bowed all around and they gave me the requisite keychain that is generally my reward from Asian crews. Then they were gone. I looked over at Bob Kagle and we both shrugged our shoulders in wonder. Bob and his partners at Benchmark Capital put up the money to launch eBay. He had been sitting right next to them, eating a bowl of oatmeal. They should have had what Bob was having.

Tony Tan, the Deputy Prime Minister of Singapore, strolled into Buck's one day with his entourage. The Ambassador from Singapore to the U.S. introduced me as "The Prime Minister of Silicon Valley," an unearned title previously bestowed upon me by a journalist. Mr. Tan winked, shook my hand and bowed, graciously acknowledging that I outranked him. He had brought a billion dollars of government money with him (more than enough to cover breakfast) to spend on high tech ventures. A press conference had been called, but the press failed to materialize. This was back in the late '90s in a Silicon Valley so flush with cash that a sum this size simply wasn't news. A billion, who cares? We all have a billion!

The most bizarre incident with the press was when a crew came in from Communist China. They told me that their station was the largest in the world and had an audience in the 100s of millions. "Oh my golly," I exclaimed, and ran into the men's room to comb my hair. They set up and proceeded to ask me every conceivable question except the color of my underwear. I knew from long experience that they would only use a couple of sentences and I wouldn't ever see the program. They changed tape a couple of times. I began to flag. Between setups, I joked with the producer that the principal reason for our success in Silicon Valley was that we had lowered the working age to 12 and had many bright-eyed teens filling the factories after school. Nudge, nudge. And then it was finally over; I got my key chain, messed up my hair, and went back to work.

A month later, I got a call from the U.S. State Department. The conversation went something like this:

"Mr. MacNiven, I'm



"this is a real man, not a doll."

Bernard Knuckles with the State Department in Washington, D.C.” Finally, I thought, my country is calling me to foreign service. I guess the whole draft-dodging thing really has blown over.

He went on: “Do you recall giving an interview to a television crew from mainland China about a month ago?”

“Y-es,” I said hesitantly. Keep in mind that my dealings with the State Department had been rather limited to this point.

“Do you recall having made some remarks in that interview about the working age in California?” he asked.

I couldn’t believe it! The station had run the bit about the working age. I recalled the TV people telling me that the interview would be translated into Chinese. Now, with the U.S. State Department on line one, I instantly realized that I might be on the edge of a huge international incident. Perhaps my best approach would be to pretend I wasn’t actually live. “If you would like to leave a message...”

Knuckles wasn’t fooled. “Mr. MacNiven,” he continued. This trick of calling me by my last name was making me nervous. It’s what a judge says before he gives you 20 years. “I’m calling because we have had several reports that you told the interviewer that the working age is 12 in United States factories.”

There was no reason to panic. They might be watching the airports, but I could hide in a box of lemons and slip across the border at Tijuana before midnight. “Whatever I said about anything that might get anyone in trouble (especially me), I would have said in jest,” I told him with a confidence I didn’t feel.

“Mr. MacNiven,” he intoned. There he was with the “Mr.” thing again! “You might ‘take the time to realize’ that things like this can be taken very seriously by people who might not know the truth. You might keep in mind to whom (I remember he said “to whom”—he must have gone to Georgetown) you are speaking.” I’ve since used the phrase “you might take the time to realize” in my everyday speech. It’s the way a frayed professor speaks to a bunch of empty-headed freshmen.

I regained my composure in seconds. I didn’t riot in the streets of Berkeley to let some desk pilot from Washington tell me what I can and can’t say to the press.

“Look Bernie, are you telling me what I’m allowed to say?” I asked with some of that old Berkeley radical spunk.

“No, no. Not at all. I’m just asking you, as a patriotic citizen, to please consider that when you joke with certain people, *Communist people*, they can take you seriously and the ‘stultification’ of our relations can result.” I had begun to think that this was a friend having me out for a laugh, but I hadn’t mentioned my offhand comment to anyone and the

only ones who had actually heard it were the commies themselves. Plus, no friend of mine would ever think to say 'stultification.'

This guy was trying to prevail upon me as a patriotic citizen to be part of a united front to help give an accurate impression of America. Boy, did he have the wrong number! If the Communist media was going to run the mumblings of a half-baked lunatic then I was definitely going to turn up the heat. The press shows up and off I go like a broken bag of ball bearings under a marching band.

I show up routinely in articles with George Bush, Warren Buffett and Bill Gates. I've been termed everything from one of a pair of "prominent financial analysts, Greenspan and MacNiven..." (*Irish Times*), to (my personal favorite) "Yankee Gadfly" (*The Financial Times of London*). It was this business of taking me seriously that resulted in the complete collapse of the internet dream.

Some marketing folks from Yahoo! came by one day for lunch in the winter of 1999 and told me about a national executive conference they were going to hold in Carmel Valley a few months later. They explained that they were going to invite principals of old guard companies such as Procter and Gamble and Taco Bell and some from shiny new startups. These folks would get together for two days and explore how to integrate the Web into their futures. As lunch progressed, it dawned on me that I might be invited to attend this two-day event with all the top execs from Yahoo!. Then it seemed that they wanted me to actually speak to the group. Before they left it was settled: I would give the keynote address.

I was destined to chum up with Yahoo!. This is a company with an exclamation point in its name. Its corporate color is purple. They named the company for an imagined race of loutish bumpkins from *Gulliver's Travels* and their product is powerful, real and completely intangible.

I asked them what they wanted me to speak about and how long I had the floor. "Take as long as you like and talk about anything you want," they said. True visionaries! I decided to cover the history of communication, provide a complete overview of economics, and then lay out the plan for the future of commerce in the 21st century. I would create a theory of everything and then find sources to support my position, whatever that position turned out to be. No problemo. I felt pretty well equipped to cover communication, as I more or less just chat for a living and I was certainly as good as anyone else at predicting the future. The only section I needed help on was the economics, so I called Milton Friedman at Stanford.

Milton won the Nobel Prize for Economics and I decided to bounce my theory of internet capital acceleration off this learned gentleman. I

called up his assistant, who told me that Dr. Friedman was extremely busy and was not up to speaking with crackpots right at the moment. I asked her if she would tell him that the guy from Buck's was on the line. I hoped that he might confuse me with someone of importance.

Amazingly, he came to the phone and remembered us meeting. (We met? Oh, sure, aaaahh...of course.) I explained that I had to give a talk involving my theory that if the internet allows you to spend a dollar faster, that dollar becomes more valuable. My personal experience was that if I could buy something online I tended to spend more money, rather than just sit on the couch and think about spending money. I concluded that if we flipped our cash two or three times faster we would double or triple our collective capital and essentially have an economy that was that much bigger. Dr. Friedman asked me to send my idea in writing. And so I did. He wrote a rather lengthy exposition in reply, illustrating that what I had imagined to be capital growth was an illusion or even (say it ain't so Dr. F.!) a *hallucination*. He made reference to tangible goods and services and all that ol' time nonsense. In the nicest possible way, he told me that I had no idea what I was talking about.

At the conference, we all had a chuckle at this dear old fellow's expense. He was obviously out of touch with the New Economy. At that point, Yahoo! stock had a capitalization of around 150 billion dollars, or roughly the size of the GNP of South *and* Central America combined.

A few days after my speech the stock started to slip. It continued to fall along with all the rest of the internet stocks, and before we knew it, that ol' gopher popped his head out of the dam. A loud gurgling sound followed as about a trillion dollars drained away.

After this speech Andy Serwer at *Fortune Magazine* referred to me as the Zsa Zsa Gabor of Silicon Valley: famous for no apparent reason.



A handsomer compliment could not be wished for.

I love the whole idea of Zsa Zsa Gabor. She was a spectacular beauty in her day, which lasted well into the evening. I'll bet you can't name even one of her 43 movies, but she appeared in classics like *Won Ton Ton*, *The Dog Who Saved Hollywood* and *The Queen of Outer Space*. It's true—her roles were usually small and her credits read things like: flirt, herself, the stewardess, cameo, nightclub owner, girl at bar and Frankenstein's Great Aunt Tillie. Nearly everyone thinks that she was on TV as a socialite transplant to a farm on *Green Acres*, but that was actually her sister Eva. What people do remember is that she was married to seven men eight times. Like Elizabeth Taylor, she started to run out of eligible men and married one twice. The most bizarre part is that after a life of glamour for glamour's sake, she is best remembered for beating up a cop.

In 1989 Zsa Zsa was stopped for running a light and for having an open container ("Since when is drinking and driving against the law, dahling?"). Things quickly degenerated to the point where she was forced to slap the badge-wielding scoundrel, who promptly hauled her two-bit movie star be-hind to jail, where she spent her time banging a tin cup against the bars and swearing at the turnkeys. She remembers jail as a scorpion-infested dungeon, a bubbling slime pit with shrieking lepers hanging from chains along the greasy stone walls, but I've seen the Beverly Hills jail, and the worst thing you can say about it is that the tennis court isn't air conditioned.

Tossing Zsa Zsa in the cooler was not the first time society tried to bend her over its lap and give her a paddling. Once Zsa



strip search!

Zsa was on a commercial airliner and the flight attendant asked her to put her yappy little dog back in its box for the duration of the flight. Zsa Zsa said something like “#%&((+M#1;;;#@\$!!!” The flight attendant was not happy at being cussed out and insisted that the dog stay in the box or Zsa Zsa would be told to leave the plane. Keep in mind that they were at 35,000 feet. Zsa Zsa figured that they wouldn't dare toss her out at that altitude. She was right, but only just. She must have pushed someone's buttons pretty hard, because not only was she left sitting on a runway in Phoenix with all of her luggage and her dog, but she was

promptly sent a bill for several thousand dollars for expenses incurred by the unscheduled landing.

In April of 2000, I commenced my campaign to have lunch with Zsa Zsa, much like when Napoleon marched on Moscow to eat *everyone's* lunch. It was easy enough to find her agent. I called him up and explained that I wasn't just a fan, I was a Zsa Zsa. I told him that I wanted—no, needed—to have lunch with Zsa Zsa Gabor, the greatest glamour queen of all time. He thought it very unlikely that she would agree, but promised to ask her if she would take my call. Five minutes later, he phoned back with her home number. Zsa Zsa herself picked up the phone with a throaty “Hello Dahling.” I explained the bit about being more than a fan and asked her if she would deign to have lunch with me. I promised to be wildly entertaining. She said that she had had it up to *here* with interesting people and there was no way she would meet anyone new. I could see my opportunity hanging by a thread, so I grabbed the blonde by the horns and told her that of all the stars in Hollywood, she glimmered with the most dazzling light. I praised her resilient individuality. I was about to launch into a detailed review of her excellent choice of hairdressers when she cut me off. She “vood tink about it,” she said, and told me I should call her next week.

I phoned her agent and told him about the conversation. He gave me her address so that I could send flowers. I sent her flowers, I sent him flowers; I think I even sent the florist flowers, so keen was I to land this one. I called her the following week and she gushed over the flowers but groused at the tackiness of the delivery man, who had the poor taste to put part of his thigh in her dog's mouth. The little terrier of years past had grown up into a pack of felonious German Shepherds, which I could hear barking in the background. I pressed her gingerly for a lunch date but she waffled and told me to call her the following week. I waited a few days and screwed up my nerve to call her again. For some reason it made me as nervous as a 7th grader at his first dance. I was actually trying to get an 83-year-old woman to go out with me. I developed a routine of calling her every couple of weeks, and I felt we were building a solid foundation that would lead, in time, to a real relationship, even if it was anchored in the shifting sands of camp theater.

One week I sent a miniature pink shoe festooned with pink fluffy feathers and later followed it with its twin. Once I sent a theatrical diamond ring as big as a good-sized tumor. I sent her a copy of *Touch of Evil*, the Orson Wells film in which Charleston Heston plays a completely unconvincing Mexican detective and Zsa Zsa has a bit part as a dance hall girl. Sometimes she was out when I called, and I would get her answering machine, but I faithfully checked in every couple of

weeks like some demented parolee. The cost in time and trinkets was rising and I seemed to be getting no closer to a face-off. Even though we spoke regularly, it was never for more than a couple of minutes. In time my interest began to wane. I had kept this up for nearly a year and finally, my cleverness exhausted, I told her that I could see I was obviously annoying her and would have the *savoir faire* to bother her no further. I could play hard to get, too. She agreed to go with me to the Polo Lounge at the Beverly Hills Hotel the very next week.

Bing-go! I would finally get my picture taken with Zsa Zsa Gabor.

I have a lot of clothes, but when you're anticipating lunch with Zsa Zsa Gabor, nothing seems quite right. I finally settled on my gold silk suit and honeycomb shirt with gold honeybee buttons. I really wanted to wear my red lizard boots and matching belt, but I didn't want to upstage her, so I reined myself in and wore the black alligator. I arranged for a Bentley limo and started counting down the days.

Rudy (the limo driver), pulled the car up to her home in Bel Air. We were buzzed in from the gate, and were immediately surrounded by a swarm of dogs that tried to eat the hapless Rudy right through the driver's side window, scaring him rather badly. "Rudy," I yelled, "don't chicken out now! I've come too far!" The lead dog had cut eight neat gouges in the driver's door and the tears were already starting to collect at the corners of Rudy's eyes. I knew that he would be shot for a dog himself when he took the car back, but I felt like the stalwart General Gordon at Khartoum. There was nothing to be done but wait for rescue. But, as at Khartoum, rescue never came. We sat for a full ten minutes and no one appeared to save us. The dogs circled the car glaring at us, looking for a weak spot. I assured Rudy that even German Shepherds couldn't come through the glass, but secretly I wasn't so sure.

It didn't look like anyone was going to call off these damn dogs so I decided to take my chances and get out. I remembered what had happened to the flower guy, and he encountered dogs all the time. I hadn't thought to bring a pistol or mace to the Beverly Hills Hotel but, heck, I'm a dog guy, and besides, there could be worse things than being eaten by Zsa Zsa's dogs (although nothing immediately sprang to mind). So I opened the door and stepped out. We had initially calculated that there were 8 or 10 dogs but when they stopped moving there were only two of them. They were momentarily quiet and sat side by side like nice doggies waiting to see what was going to happen next. I walked toward the house, feeling exactly like Rod Taylor must have when he and Tippi Hedren were walking past all those seagulls in *The Birds*.

The dogs tried to intimidate me with their dark, malevolent eyes, but I strode up to the door with a confidence I didn't feel and pushed

the bell. A tune chimed. I think it was the theme song from *Bonanza*. I was going to push it again to make sure, but before I could, Zsa Zsa herself opened the door. The dogs leaped up as if they had been smoking cigarettes in a pool of gasoline. They streaked toward her as she screamed an oath ribald enough to make a longshoreman cringe. I certainly did. Zsa Zsa didn't even seem to notice me and continued to excoriate the dogs. They skittered across the marble floor and disappeared.

She finally looked at me through her impenetrable sunglasses. "Are you the one from San Francisco?" she asked. I said that I thought I was and she told me to "Wait a minute, Dahling," while she snatched a handbag the size and appearance of a padded toilet seat. She took my proffered arm, and we proceeded to the car. The woman might be as old as rock, but she vigorously launched into a tirade about the "brigands and scoundrels" she had known. She rattled on how she used to date Kemal Ataturk. I looked him up. He founded modern Turkey.

After a few minutes she seemed to notice me. "You aren't nearly as good looking as Tyrone Power," she said. I had no answer to this. After a moment she added, "You aren't even as good looking as Noel Coward, and he was a fruit." I was unclear as to what prompted this attack on my appearance, which I had worked so hard on, but just then we pulled up to the hotel.

There is a studied disregard for movie stars in Beverly Hills, but the staff was just a bit amazed when they saw Zsa Zsa. We were shown to a great table and I looked around for real movie stars, but the *in* crowd left about a generation ago for Wolfgang's. I finally did recognize someone: Mike Myers. I looked at him with the gaga wonder I reserve for anyone who has pocketed \$100 million playing a scatological secret agent in a bad wig. He saw me gawking and was about to toss me a dismissive sneer when he saw who I was with.

He approached us tentatively and I introduced Miss Gabor to Mike. She said, in a perfect impersonation of herself, "Call me Zsa Zsa, Dahling." Mike was tremendous. He told her he loved her and she nodded and smiled vaguely. When he left she asked me, "Who was that baby, Dahling?" Before I could answer, the photographer I had hired strode up to the table. He knew he would have to be quick; they really frown on paparazzi in the Polo Lounge.

This was to be the culmination of a year of hard work. I was finally in the stadium; the roaring crowd was coming to its feet. Actually, it was Zsa Zsa who was roaring and coming to her feet.

I asked her if we could have our picture taken. She said something like "#%&((+M#1;;#@ \$" She shot out of her chair and marched out front where the ever-vigilant Rudy brought the car over. I followed

after having fished out about a pound of cash, and arrived on the sidewalk just as the car was pulling away. I stood there in my silk coat, napkin in hand. Mike had seen the whole thing and said I was lucky she didn't slap the crap out of me.

Rudy was back in a few minutes. His black ears had turned red. Apparently Zsa Zsa gave him a taste of her whip on the way home and when she got out, she told him to slam the car door on me.

"Hey, Zsa Zsa, Dahling, I'm still back at the restaurant!"

I rode up front with Rudy on the way to the airport. I was cruising along in a Bentley that had been mauled by vicious dogs. I had just been spurned by Zsa Zsa Gabor. Things couldn't have gone better, I thought. Rudy asked me what I did for a living. "This is it," I said.

He shook his head in wonder. "Man," he said, "I wish I had your job."

We pulled up to the airline terminal. Rudy turned to me and said, "Can I have your autograph?"

I smiled at my new fan. I was a player! I was Hollywood! "Sure, Rudy I'll make it out to — "My dear friend Rudy, who..."

He shook his head and thrusting a clipboard at me said, "Just sign the damn form, man."



"zsa zsa, pleeeeeeese"

Chapter 3.

A PENNILESS CHILD

Of course I didn't always lead such a glamorous life. Like a lot of people, I used to be a kid.



When I was three years old, I decided to accompany my mother and my sister, Jane, on our fourth move. In schools alone, I have a life list of 23 elementary, 2 high schools and 5 colleges and universities. The only graduation I managed to attend was from the 6th grade. The rest of the diplomas are still in the mail. My mother, Marilyn, continues to be light on her feet to this day, even though she solemnly declares that “this is it” after each move, but we know that it's only a matter of time (and not much of that) until she breaks camp once more.

Marilyn has always been a hopeful romantic. She dreams up a notion and that's how it's going to be, no doubt about it. It doesn't matter if the fantasy destination is on the other side of the planet. It doesn't matter if the next hot scheme is illegal in all but one state or if it requires a Ph.D. When my sister Jane and I would hear her say, “Don't you think it's high time we sally forth?” we would run and hide in the woods, hoping to miss the movers, but we never did.

My reaction to all this moving was to embrace change. Jane, however, eventually had enough and felt that some discipline was called for, so she signed up with the Air Force and morphed from a little girl in pigtails to the dreaded Major. She used the muscles she developed beating me up when we were kids to win the female pushup record for ALL the armed services, and held it for almost a decade.

I had always thought of my earliest years as relatively uneventful, but later I learned that it was considered outside of the normal range on the bell curve for an eight-year-old to wander off into the chaparral and burn a third of the county while attempting to send smoke signals to the Indians. I played by myself a lot and



the amazing ruth

made up my own rules because I was always the new kid. When the other kids asked me where I was from, I told them Japan. World War II was still a very fresh memory and I soon discovered that telling kids I was from Japan was a lousy way to make friends.

My father, John, was brought up on a scrappy little hard-collar farm by Presbyterian Scots who trembled before God in a cold country church in *northern* North Dakota. They eventually moved to St. Paul, Minnesota, where my father and mother met in high school. Two more different people would be hard to imagine. Perhaps their good looks drove them together, because it sure couldn't have been their backgrounds. My father saw the world from a missionary position but my mother had a different point of view, having descended from trapeze artists.

My mother's parents, Big Al and Natalie, always thought of themselves as show people. 'Show' as in small time carnival and freak show, where my grandfather worked the midway with every con from three-card monte to high stakes poker. Grandma, under the stage name, The Amazing Ruth, was a hoochie-koochie girl. She danced with a series of listless boa constrictors doing a strip tease. It was so mild by current standards that you could probably do it in church today...well, maybe not some churches.

Big Al tried a lot of angles. One of his big ideas was a quack device called the Radium Ore Rejuvenator. This was a water jug supposedly made out of radioactive ore which would "pep up" tired drinking water. It guaranteed you "a body strong in muscle and a continence of rosy hue." Rosy hue indeed. Drinking radium laced water is unpopular these days because it is a deadly poison, but before people began to glow too much, Al's father died and left the kid a successful department store chain. It ruined their lives as carnies but they decided to gather around the money and settle down in Minneapolis. Big Al had a great many gifts that he passed on to his children. In high school my mother could juggle five cigar boxes. She noticed that it failed to attract the boys, though, and so she hid this spectacular talent.

My grandfather left the stage all too soon but he did certainly go with a flourish. The Amazing Ruth told us that he bought a derelict hotel in St. Paul with the express plan of burning it down for the insurance. To make the scam more convincing Big Al took up residence on the fourth floor a few weeks before the fire. In the crummier hotels back then it was not uncommon to see a coil of rope tied to a radiator on the upper floors in place of a fire escape. It was Big Al's plan to shinny down the rope as soon as he heard the fire alarm but Big Al was—well, damn big—and the Civil War era rope couldn't take the load so down he went through the skylight of a ground-floor restaurant in the

midst of the startled diners.

Ruth always told this story to us kids to impart an important life lesson. I was fuzzy as to what she meant exactly because when pressed she would pretend to lock her lips with an invisible key and drop the key down her bodice which is pretty funny to see your grandmother do. The Amazing Ruth seemed to live forever, but she eventually shuffled off at the age of 97 years and two days, her birthday party having plum wore her out. I realize now that the moral of the story has to have been: "check the rope."

When he was just out of college, my father heard 'the calling,' which happens only rarely to Presbyterians. The calling didn't stand in the way of true love, however, and my parents got married despite the fact that it thwarted my mother's plan to move to New York and become a writer. My father had a very different idea. He wanted to build a cold little church in the god-forsaken wilderness, and that is exactly what he did. Bad vision kept him out of The War, but he intended to do his part to straighten out the Japanese, so he joined the postwar frenzy in the reconstruction of Japan and moved his wife and three-year-old daughter to some forgotten fishing village on the north island of Hokkaido and set about to convert the natives. When I say forgotten village, I mean just that. My mother can't even recall the name of the place, so I don't know where I was born. No big deal. After two years of trying to kick the Shinto out of these simple country folk John gave up, having convinced no one. They moved back to the sunny shores of Lake Minnetonka and took me with them.

Back in Minnesota, Marilyn took a job teaching second grade and John threw away his collar and bought a bar. Things unraveled almost immediately. My mother had ambition; my father had a hundred bottles of firewater. A long winter stretched out in front of all of us. Then, about a year after coming back to Minnesota, my father's brother sold the family farm and gave him his share of the money. My parents had talked about buying a house but John had other ideas. One day, soon after he got the money, he pulled up in front of our apartment in a spiffy new Ford convertible, speedboat attached. Just to show that he wasn't selfish, he bought a car for my mother too.

John spent the summer of '52 cruising around the lake, neglecting the bar until he needed a refill. My sister said that it was the best summer of her life, but I don't remember a thing. Fall fell, the bar failed, and John found himself at home a good deal of the time, working his way through the remaining liquor inventory. On the day the last drop of crème de menthe disappeared, so did my mother and us kids. We went to visit her parents on the other side of town and never came back.

Marilyn thought that her father, Big Al, was a bad influence on my sister and me too because he was still a huckster at heart. She didn't fully appreciate the fact that he was a *successful* huckster. My mother put a stop to it when she found Big Al teaching my sister to mark cards and the poor kid never did learn how to juggle.

My mother wanted a fresh start away from Presbyterians, carnival people, and drunks, so in the dead of winter we moved from 10 feet of snow to Shangri-La, where it was eternally summer. The 1937 movie *Lost Horizon* is about a downed pilot (played by the dashing mustachioed Ronald Coleman) who, with his last bit of endurance, stumbles into a hidden valley in the Himalayas. This was Shangri-La, the land that time forgot, where people lived for hundreds of years in peace and harmony. The Ojai Valley, north of Los Angeles, with its picturesque orange groves, provided the perfect long shot for this mythical valley. Marilyn had seen the movie as a teenager with her Aunt Red, and so we went to live with her. We had all moved right into the picture.

We arrived by bus in the winter of '52. I was flat broke at the time and not just because I was three. Marilyn didn't have any money either. We were separated from our luggage when we arrived by train in LA, and then she lost her purse on the bus. So there we were, three junkyard cats washed up in a dusty California town.



forced to hunt for food

Aunt Red ran the makeup counter at the Ojai Pharmacy in the middle of town for nearly 40 years. In her was perfected the gene of relentless optimism, a trait that still lurks in our family gene pool to this day. She had marvelous expressions like "you look faaabbuuulous sweetie." At the sales counter, she once was heard to remark to a customer, "Sweetie, you have no idea how lucky you are. Beauty is only skin deep, but ugly runs all the way to the bone." Aunt Red was perennially single, but with her brilliant red hair and her 'devil take the high road' outlook, she was always in great demand and toured the world incessantly with her wealthy friends. One of her close pals was Beatrice Wood. The two of them would dress in costumes you might have seen the early California Spanish noble women wear, resplendent in silver bracelets and beaded slippers, and sashay through town twirling their parasols. They were hippies out of time. Beatrice was a famous potter and sculptor even in the '50s and was eventually called the

“oldest working woman in America” when she died in 1998 at the age of 105. Even at the end of her life, she was still producing lyrical statues of young lovers passionately entwined.

Aunt Red once took us to have tea with Loretta Young. At the time, Loretta had a successful TV show and was a big movie star. The maid at her house reminded me of the mammy in *Gone with the Wind*, which we had seen the day before. Later I learned that it actually was the mammy, Hattie McDaniel, who was staying with Loretta. She had won the Academy Award for best supporting actress for her role and was in town for the 15th anniversary screening of the movie.

Big Al and The Amazing Ruth came to visit and stayed at the Ojai Valley Inn, where I discovered that glass ashtrays became invisible when tossed into the swimming pool. Then there were Al’s phenomenal coin tricks. One was to pluck a silver dollar from thin air and then give it to me, telling me to hold it tightly between my two hands. Then he would give my hands a slight tap and when I opened them there were four quarters. I never figured out how he did that. I can still picture him in a smoke-filled room, playing poker with the hotel staff, no doubt fleecing them out of their rent money. Aunt Red used to say, “That man could hustle the rosary beads off a nun.” I once saw him shoot pool, clearing the table without the other player getting a single shot. Big Al could hypnotize chickens, dogs and people. He could pull a bouquet of flowers from your pants pocket and he could give you a bicycle for your birthday. But falling into real money took a good deal of the sweetness out of the hustle for him. If I hadn’t taken up pancakes professionally, I like to think that I could have made it as a grifter myself.

Ojai was slow to catch up with the 20th century. When I was a kid, an ice truck made deliveries in our neighborhood, because some of the old timers wouldn’t go with “them new-fangled ee-lectric Frigidaires.” Like the barefoot boys of the previous century, we begged for ice chips from the driver on hot summer days. He would give us some and then hoist a great block of ice, held in a pair of tongs, over his shoulder and lug it into the house. Picturesque as hell. Then he rather casually ran over our cat and didn’t even stop to say he was sorry.

At the local pharmacy, we could buy small vials of pure mercury, which we would rub onto pennies to make them look like silver, and then pass them off as dimes to kids dumber than us. Why they would sell something as toxic as mercury is still a mystery to me. “Hey kids! Let’s go play in the asbestos mine after we finish rubbing mercury on these pennies!”

The only thing that cramped our fun was some deal my mother had cut with my father that required our presence in church on Sundays. I

would slither into a little suit and a strangley tie and Jane would put on what looked to me like a party dress, and then Marilyn would drive us, like little POWs, across town to church. The service was boring, our stiff clothes were hot, and the minister might just as well have been speaking Chinese for all we could understand. One Sunday, my mother looked uncharacteristically upset as we were getting dressed but she didn't say anything, and so we got into the car as scheduled. She drove along for a couple of minutes, then pulled over, and stopped the car. She turned to look at us in the back seat and gravely announced: "Your father died." Jane immediately burst into tears. I just sat there. In Sunday school, I had been given the impression that death was kind of like moving to another town, and because John already lived in another town, it wasn't any big deal. Besides, I couldn't remember him at all. My mother drove two more blocks and then she pulled over again and asked, "Do you kids want to go to church or go to the beach and then get ice cream on the way home?"

And that was the end of our religious training.

We lived in Ojai for four years and it seemed like we would be there forever until my mother met Walter. Walter Benefield worked for North American Aviation and his job involved traveling between military bases to teach the pilots and maintenance crews some rigamarole with early jet fighter planes. He was a handsome ex-GI who swept Marilyn off her feet and back onto the road.

As a wedding present Walter had bought himself a television. I had never seen TV before so I thought things would work out all right with this guy. Back then, I was a big fan of Superman, played on TV by George Reeves. He was a truly heroic figure to us then, but when you look at the pictures of George today you realize he wore badly padded tights, a smart-alecky grin and sneaky hair. One of the most painful surprises I have ever had was when George committed suicide by shooting himself. TV had lied to me.

Devil With a Dial

One of the things I am absolutely sure about is the fact that TV, when taken in sum, is more disruptive to the formulation of good character than any other single component of our culture. It also makes you FAT. Daytime TV is populated with grotesque caricatures of people you would never pick for friends; on nighttime TV, everyone is far better looking and much hipper than you are. And, of course, most people seem to be armed. When I tell people that we don't own a TV and that my children haven't grown up under its control, they invariably congratulate me and tell me that they really just watch public television or nature programs and can leave TV alone, or that

it is just “playing in the background.” The truth is that most of us are TV addicts and it’s a fact that more people have TV’s in America than have telephones. The reason I am not for legalized hard drugs is because I’ve seen what legalized TV does and the picture isn’t pretty. We are so addicted to TV that most people can’t eat at home without the TV on. Of course, that doesn’t include you.

The fact is that TV makes you feel better than no TV. Why is this bad? Well, TV is a one-way street. Manufactured emotions are disseminated with Orwellian efficiency. If you watch the American average of 15,000 hours by the age of 18 you will have a pretty twisted view of life. We have all heard about TV violence but that isn’t really the problem. People watch more violence on TV than ever before and violent crime keeps dropping each year. Perceptions to the contrary, over the last 20 years violent crime is down nationwide by something like 25%. I think it’s because everyone is home watching TV instead of running around on the streets and killing each other.

The real problem isn’t the violence and certainly isn’t the sex. It is the removal of funniness from humor, or what passes for humor, by installing all those laugh tracks so you will know when to laugh. If you’re looking for the decline and fall of civilization, look no further than the TV in the corner. If your kid has a TV in his room, march right in and offer the victim any amount of money to buy the set from him, and then throw it away. Next, go after the big one in the living room and get rid of it. You know I’m right. On the other hand, maybe you should just leave things as they are because if you go messin’ with the gods the consequences can be pretty fantastic. They sure were for us.

Walter was a great mimic and I think that’s why my mother married him. He could do an adequate George Raft and a rather good Winston Churchill, but he had trouble doing a very good Walter. I could never get this man’s attention unless I burned something down, and then he was pretty quick with his belt. Back when I was a tyke it was far more common to beat little children with sticks and belts than it is today. When he first showed up, he told me that he and I would build a toy train set together. Forty-five years later, I’m still waiting for the damn train! To use a phrase of Walter’s: “His mouth was writing checks his ass couldn’t cash.” Never promise a kid something like that and not follow through if there is any possibility of the kid ending up as a writer.

The military usually moves you every couple of years, but we moved up to four times a year. We had a hospital-green Ford and we pulled a sad little teardrop-shaped trailer behind it.

Walter discovered that the boxes held up better if he reinforced the fraying cardboard with bailing wire. So he wound our books and toys in tight wire baskets for the endless trip to Nowheresville. Some of our

things never left the trailer. I've heard that the Jews were lost in the desert for 40 years. Big deal. I'll bet they didn't have their cap guns and Betsy Wetsy dolls wired shut in boxes.

Our tribe had white line fever, big time. We were junkies of the road. We wandered as far south as San Diego and as far north as Bangor, Maine. We even ended up back in Japan and made



walter has a cool one for the road

it to England and (instead of the promised Italy) Libya. When there was no local school, we would go to the military base school except in Libya where we had the summer off. It turns out that it's always summer in Libya.

In the summer prior to my junior year in high school, I decided to turn myself from a 190-lb runt into a 192-lb runt with rippling muscles that both the football coach and the cheerleaders would adore. Although I didn't grasp it at the time, my efforts to get in shape were a little wide of the mark. I found a fire hydrant in the road that had been snapped off by a truck. The water was gushing about 40 feet high and this perfectly good hydrant was just lying there. There was no hope of my reattaching it, and it was a hazard to navigation, so I dragged it away. It took several long hours to lug it all the way home. I think it must have weighed a hundred and fifty pounds or so, and I had the bright idea that if I carried it around the neighborhood all summer it would make me stronger with every step.

It's pretty hard to hold a fire hydrant and walk at the same time, but it was a big improvement over the Citroen engine block I had been using. My plan was to walk an increasing number of steps up and down the street twice a day, and this is what I was doing when a kindly neighbor saw me staggering along and realized that I wasn't with the water works department but just some dumb kid who was going to end up with a broken spine. And he told me just that: "You're a dumb kid and you're going to break your spine." He offered to sell me a set of weights for \$10 and since I delivered newspapers. (Did you know that all the great men from Gandhi to Bill Clinton delivered newspapers?) I had the cash. In short order, I was the proud new owner of a somewhat rusted-out set of weights.

Much later in life, I discovered that fitness is more than the simple lifting of as much weight as possible, but this wasn't until I was 43 and had blown a couple of shoulders and a knee. I took that first set of

weights to the garage and sprayed them silver, then painted the bar with a glossy black oil-based paint. Even though the bar wasn't quite dry, I installed the entire collection of discs, and it looked just great. A bar is about 4 feet long, and this one required that you tighten a clamp at either end with a wrench. I was fishing around on the work bench when Walter came in and decided to demonstrate the one-hand, overhead snatch. This is a guy who hadn't lifted much more than a beer can since 1945. I turned just as he grabbed the weights off the floor and snatched them neatly into the air. He had enough muscle mass to get the weights over his head but not enough brain mass to compute the balance problem. He immediately started to lose the load and took a couple of quick steps to save himself, but it was too late. The bar came down on one end, right in the center of the hood of his car.

The hood folded up so efficiently that to this day I think the best way to destroy a Corvair is to use a set of weights. When the weights hit, the discs on the low side fell off, leaving the top discs overbalanced, and all this crashed into the windshield and dragged the hapless Walter along for the ride. He wanted to let go, but the weights weren't done with him yet; the sticky paint had glued his hands to the bar.

The Corvair, Unsafe Even in the Garage

Walter loved that car. It was a sleek, jet black Corvair, a car so ill-conceived and badly made that there was a joke a few years later that if we really wanted to win the war in Vietnam, all we had to do was ship the North Vietnamese our Corvairs and they would all be killed when the cars spontaneously burst into flames. This was the car that launched Ralph Nader's career when he wrote about it in his book *Unsafe at Any Speed*. Since Ralph split the vote in the 2000 presidential election, you might say that the Corvair is somewhat responsible for why Al Gore isn't President today. There's that pesky butterfly again. Flap, flap, flap.

The tip of the bar caught the edge of the roof, mangling it. Walter crashed halfway through the windshield which, along with him, was cracked and sagging. If it weren't for safety glass, he would have lost an arm or two, in which case he'd have to learn to swing a belt with his teeth. To say that Walter was unhappy with the turn of events would be to ask Captain Bligh, "Other than the mutiny, how was your trip?"

Walter was a man with a short temper even on a good day, and I immediately visualized the unhappy ending that lay ahead. A grim picture indeed.

I saw it like this: I delivered the local papers. Walter hated the press because they were a bunch of lying liberals who couldn't keep their

pinko opinions to themselves, the rottencommiebastards. I not only worked for these commie bastards, but with the money I earned I had also bought a set of weights (probably made with imported steel), which I had left lying around, *unclamped*, just waiting to destroy the finest piece of American craftsmanship ever to glide off an assembly line in Detroit. I had strategically placed these weights next to the car and, with complete disregard and malicious intent, had lured the stalwart GI (who had valiantly dropped bombs on the Huns from the Rhine to the Rhone) in a bold attempt to:

1. Cut his arms off
2. Embarrass and humiliate him
3. Destroy his car
4. Promote Communism

My 15-year-old mind held out the hope that, in the spirit of the Munich Peace Conference, we would simply deconstruct the moment and, like on the TV show *Father Knows Best*, Walter would take me by the hand (lucky for him, his were still attached) and calmly reason with me. It turns out that the Munich Peace Conference came to naught because a few weeks later Adolf Hitler laughed at Prime Minister Chamberlain and invaded half of Europe. My happy scene was not to be. When I saw the look in Walter's eyes, I realized that running to some place like Brazil would be more practical than a peace conference, so I immediately decided to give up my life as a suburban kid and take off for South America. Just then, Walter peeled his fingers off the bar and headed towards me like a Yellowstone Grizzly whose cub you've just run over. I knew right away that he would catch me long before I could get a passport.

But—Aha!—my summer buff-up program came to the rescue. *OK Walter, prepare to lose some teeth!* We squared off and leveled our fists at each other like a couple of 19th century bareknucklers. We circled round and round and I envisioned beating the poor old fellow to his knees, paying him back for all the years of barely noticing me and giving him a few good whacks for my friends in the pinko-press. Yeah, right. This was not a small man. He might not have been fast or fit, but he was as big as a sofa and could have squished me into turtle soup in about two seconds. I can still see those huge, black-painted hands grabbing for me. He lunged but then my trusty fire hydrant came to the rescue. Walter tripped over it and down he went. I could hear the bone snap. He stayed down. I kept running, intending to grab a false beard and some quick Portuguese.

After he came back from the hospital, he never mentioned the incident at all. We all tiptoed around, waiting for the showdown, but it

never came. Instead, we sullenly watched more TV than ever before.

And then my mother decided to detonate a tactical thermonuclear device in the family room. It happened on a Tuesday afternoon in November of 1964. I came home from school and went straight to the sacred corner to turn the TV on. I reached for the knob only to realize that it was missing, and the set was gone too. There was only a dust patch where it had stood. My mother had decided that we were hooked too deep for halfway measures, so she dragged that big boy out to the cliff behind our house and shoved it over. Back in those days, a TV was a major piece of furniture and it took some doing to haul it 100 feet and push it over onto the rocks below.

The sudden disappearance of the TV did not go unnoticed by the rest of the family. Imagine going to church or showing up at your kid's school only to find a dust patch. It was about that big a deal. Walter was just a tad disconcerted by the notion that he would, after nine years, actually have to talk to us and so he decided to seek 'other opportunities.' Then my sister suddenly joined the Air Force. Before Christmas, half of the family had left by the same door the TV did and they never came back.

It was a pretty dismal Christmas, but at least we had more room in the garage with that stupid Corvair gone. Later I would realize that my mother had given me a great gift that Christmas by freeing me from the one-eyed monster (and coincidentally getting rid of Walter).

I never bought another television, and now my own family has fun the old-fashioned way. We argue.



merry xmas 1964



Chapter 4.

THE SAND HILL CHALLENGE



By the mid '90s, it dawned on me that Silicon Valley was such a powerhouse of creativity that if we drilled a little deeper we would hit a high pressure fun zone, kind of like a natural gas deposit, albeit mixed with a certain amount of hot air. The question was how to tap it. First I considered piano shooting. This is a contest in which you use hand-built launchers to see how far you can throw a piano. Then, like old Ben Hur, I became fixated on chariot racing.

As I was wrestling with the liability issues, my friend Bill Green suggested a soapbox derby. "As long as there will be crashes with grown men and women risking their lives and their dignity in flimsy and expensive contraptions," I said, "I think it just might work."

It seemed simple enough. All it would require was to close a major four-lane road and convince people to build and pilot cars of all types, from whimsically absurd art projects to elaborately engineered speed demons. People would pour in from all over the country—venture capitalists, entrepreneurs, design wackos and dreamers—for a Silicon Valley version of Woodstock. And of course we would raise tons of money in the process.

The first person on my list of likely racers was Gib Myers, a partner at Mayfield Venture Partners. I had done an extensive remodel on Gib's home in the '80s when I was getting started as a builder and he was just getting started in something called venture capital. I knew Gib trusted me because he once asked me how long I would guarantee the work I had done and I told him for as long as I was in business. A couple of years after we had finished his job, the kitchen drawers started to fall apart because we had used screws that were too short. Gib called me up, and I drove out and fixed everything. I copied this technique from L.L. Bean, whose first batch of rubber boots was defective. He hunted down all of his first customers and gave them their money back. Your best customer is the one you make a mistake with and then fix it without complaint.

So I said to Gib: "Look, I want to close down Sand Hill Road and get all you heavyweights to build some fancy cars and race down the road, risking life and limb, burning up truckloads of time and money all so that I can have a good time." Actually I was probably a little more obtuse,

but I'm sure he got the point.

Gib had only one question: "Who else is in it?"

"So far," I said, "you're the first one I've called." (When snorting up fledgling businesses, VC's aspire to first mover status, but only if they don't think you're a complete dweeb.)

Gib was encouraging, if a little wary, and after some consideration he grudgingly agreed. "Well, put me down as a possible maybe."

"Yeah, I'm telling you, baby!" I thought. I knew right then that the race was on.

Next I called Noel Perry of Baccharis Capital, and ran down the details of the race. He wanted to know who else was in.

"Gib," I said confidently, "is practically building his trophy case right now!"

Initially I imagined that it would be a giant job of butt-kicking and phone calling, and it did turn out to be quite an effort, but without the butt-kicking. I simply relied on the competitive spirit of Silicon Valley to drive the race. I had about a 50 percent acceptance rate on my first pass at signing up teams, so that turned out to be a minor part of the enterprise.

We named the event The Sand Hill Challenge, and it turned out far better than I had imagined. The crowds were larger, the cars grander, and there was an added bonus of more wrecks than I anticipated. The street positively ran with blood (all survived, with a few stitches that they wear today like prized dueling scars of old). And here's the kicker: the race made a real impact on people's lives but, like any chaotic system, in unpredictable ways.

Even though my carney sideshow genes tempted me to pull a phony charity shell game and keep all the money, something happened in our community while we were planning the race that brought us to our knees. One of our local kids died in a vicious wreck when he flipped his car in the neighborhood. The accident was attributed to drinking. My kids had gone to kindergarten with him. We were deeply saddened by this loss. It was not the first, nor would it be the last.

I decided that the money raised at the derby should be aimed at reducing the slaughter of teenagers who were driving drunk. With the assistance of The Peninsula Community Foundation, we identified a program called Safe Rides. It was a teen-run, peer to peer system involving a switchboard kids could call to get a no-questions ride home as an alternative to driving drunk or riding with an intoxicated driver. The program was about to be axed and our funding rescued and expanded it. The money from the Sand Hill Challenge provided not just thousands of miles of rides (which statistically would have otherwise

resulted in multiple accidents), but also became a good way to raise the issue among kids. In later years, additional programs for kids were supported by the race as well.

I had organized a few foot races before, and was familiar with the rigors of printing T-shirts, snagging portable toilets and calling the press, but this race involved a few larger issues: closing a major freeway exit; acquiring sound towers, timing systems and barricades; and planning for ambulances and doctors.

The highest point of Sand Hill Road has a perfect slope as it runs toward Stanford University, but I thought that a bit more go-power should be added. I figured that if the cars were pushed by two strong people for 40 feet, they would develop sufficient speed to whip down the half-mile course and keep things interesting.

I kept getting these pesky phone calls from the venture capitalists wanting to put together teams and asking me where they could find a car. “You don’t just find a car,” I told them, “you call up one of the companies you’ve funded and ask them to partner with you to build a car. If persuasion doesn’t work, threaten to pull their funding.” Actually, there turned out to be a pretty good parity between the number of builders and backers. I would get a call one day from a struggling startup

company saying they would like to build a car and race it. Five minutes later, a legal or venture capital firm would call and ask if I knew anyone who could build a car, for which they would gladly pay all costs, including the hefty entry fee.

People were so enthusiastic about forming teams. It was as if we had opened a door and let the dogs out. Lawyers got their



le boulanger and venture law race in bread hands dirty, bankers took amazing risks, and engineers got a rare chance to go outside during daylight. Since every crowd deserves a parade with a grand marshal, we had that too. The parade the first year was a mish-mash of army tanks, motorized living room couches, a hearse car club, sports stars and the Stanford Band. The second year, we tried to set a Guinness record for the largest accordion band playing *Lady of Spain*. The Guinness people wrote a spec for us requiring a minimum of 500 players but we only got 431. I didn’t care. I don’t even play the accordion. The third year I brought a troop of trained camels and have been a camel fancier ever since. I remember making a quick turn on my

camel at the start of the race and nearly knocking down Tiger Woods.

“Hey man, watch the hooves!”

Ron Brunson, a manager at Buck's, discovered that Tonya Harding (best known as the Olympic figure skater associated with kneecapping her rival Nancy Kerrigan) was available to show up at public events. We were planning the 2nd Sand Hill Challenge and Ron's dark side glowed with the notion that it would be amusing to have Tonya show up as the queen of the parade. So he got her agent on the line, and when Ron tossed out figures of 20,000 to 30,000 people Tonya herself grabbed the phone and took over the negotiations, quickly calculating her fee at about 50 cents a head. Ron did his own calculation and said, “Now let me get this straight, Miss Harding. You will ride on the float for about 25 cents per kneecap? Hello, hello...?”

Sure, we look like adults, but sometimes we act like Bart and Lisa.



“nice puppy”

The All-American Soap Box Derby Scandal

Word got back to the Soap Box Derby Racing Association of America that I was using the term ‘soap box derby.’ The director of the association called me and asked if it was true. I said it was, but that I would change it to Race Car Derby if necessary. The director said, “No, no, you don’t understand. We would be glad if you used the term. We want you to use it.” It seems that since the ‘great scandal’ interest in derby racing had been going steadily downhill. The original idea of soap box derby racing was that boys would spend happy hours with their dads out in the garage (next to the Corvair, no doubt) building wooden race cars. As many as 50,000 a year did until that fateful day in 1973 when the winner of the nationals was caught cheating. Kids would compete in qualifiers all over the country and the fastest cars would show up in Akron, Ohio for the All-American Soap Box Derby championship runoff. The cars would line up at the top of a long ramp, a metal gate would pitch forward and the cars would race to the finish. Something was fishy about the first-place car because it won by an unaccountably great distance. It just didn’t seem possible that this car could be so much faster than the rest. They had shot film of the race and when it was developed they saw that the car seemed to be stuck to the gate for just a moment and then thrust forward in front of the pack.

Just before the trophy was to be awarded, a race official beat a hole in the car with a sledgehammer. He discovered that a man, purported to be the kid’s uncle, had rigged a battery-powered electro-

magnet and conspired with the kid to blatantly cheat. The kid would activate the magnet by putting his head back against a concealed switch in the headrest. The guy was arrested for contributing to the delinquency of a minor and the race was forever tainted. It was a huge deal at the time, almost as big a deal as Superman killing himself.

The Sand Hill Challenge had a high school division and an adult division. These in turn were divided into the Whimsy Category and the Speed Category. The adults had to pay \$2,500 per entry, but the high schools got in for free. Colorful teams formed up, each with a different theme, and many participants came dressed in team outfits. The top teams had top ‘pushers’ too. Roger Craig of the San Francisco 49ers was a pusher on the winning team and another year the two top teams both had Olympic bobsledders as the pushers. One group was an American/Japanese joint venture capital firm; they raced a 1954 vintage Soap Box Derby car, which had been repainted with their logos. A cross-dressing geisha (a 230-lb ex-college football fullback) drove the car while it was being pushed by two ninjas. President Idei of Sony was an honorary member of their team. Another group, Tanning Technologies, came from Denver with two teams and forty members. Dr. Thomas Fogarty’s venture group had a roller coaster designer build an 1,800 lb stainless steel car that looked like a, well, a roller coaster car.

Draper Fisher Jurvetson could always be counted on for a team of transcendent whimsy. DFJ invests in original sciences, including nanotechnology, the world of microscopic gears and such. One year they erected a press tent and they all dressed in lab coats and displayed electron microscope photos of their Nano Car. It was a vehicle that was supposedly about a millionth of an inch long and had a tiny mechanical driver who would pilot it down the course. Because it was actually a quantum-mechanical car it had a handicap assigned to it; it was so incredibly fast that it had to run the course 10,000 times, back and forth. The team came forward with a pair of tweezers and Tim Draper dropped the car down a plastic tube onto the roadway. The crowd loved it and so did the magazine called *Small Times*, an engineering magazine devoted to nanotech. They took the press release and ran it straight, as if it were actually a scientific first. “Hey, buddy. It’s a j-o-k-e.”

One team of engineers and physicists built the most beautiful car imaginable out of parts scrounged from the Stanford Linear Accelerator. It was actually constructed out of an unused section of the particle accelerator. It’s amazing what 30 engineers can do with 10 million dollars worth of parts. I called up *Scientific American* magazine and asked if they would sponsor the SLAC team’s entry fee. The editor was pretty sure it would be impossible because they had never sponsored

any sort of team in their 150-year history. Amazingly, though, they later agreed to do it. No one had ever asked them to sponsor a racing team, and they were glad to be asked.

Someone decided to build a two-story, fire and smoke breathing King Kong atop a golf cart. It

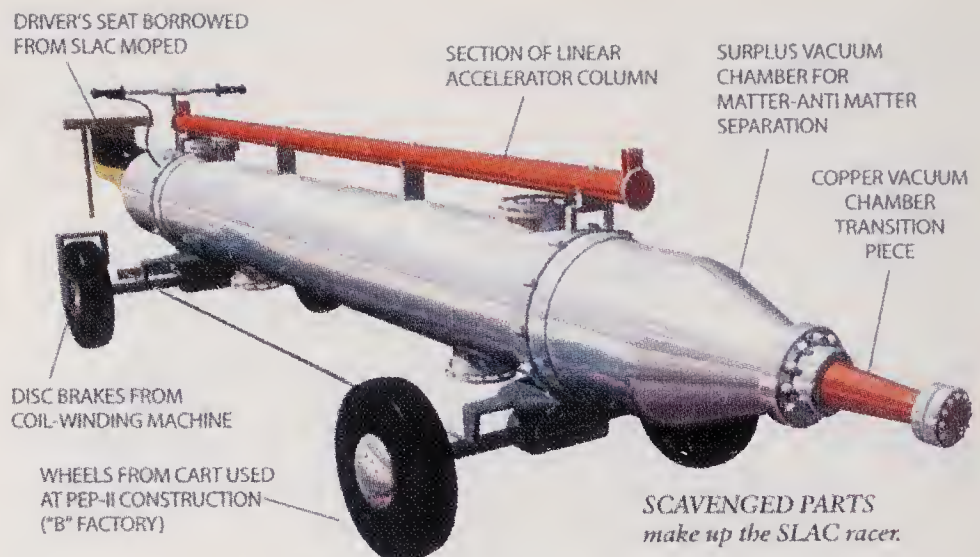
was the king of the hill until another group inflated a 50-foot-tall Godzilla, which threatened the town when the wind came up and the ropes started to pull some of the stakes loose. There was a wonderful



"he - he - he..."

my son Tyler's high school team built the ugliest car in the race, using a sheet of plywood with four bike tires mounted on water pipes. The contraption handily beat a group of students who had built a spectacularly beautiful car with the assistance of Lockheed. The first year, my oldest son Dylan's software company was the single entrant (and therefore the first-place winner) in the 'wheel-less' category with its Santa Cruz Racing Slug. This was a yellow plastic glob fashioned into a giant slug that laid down its own soapy track as it slithered down the hill.

Racers eager to test their cars showed up at midnight on Sand Hill Road and raced in the dark. This proved to be as out of control as it sounds. My friend Keith Simon and the Rolls Royce dealer in San



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Francisco built 'the fastest racing bed in the world' but it proved a little hard to handle. As they sped along in the dark of night, Keith and his two fellow passengers were tossed into the road at about 35 mph and ended up in the hospital. After that, the police started to crack down on the midnight racers and chased off both the local fire department's team and members of their own department who were testing their cars in the dark.



tyler takes second in the 'uglymobile'

If you had to purchase these cars outright, some of them would have cost well over \$100,000. A rumor spread that some companies were spending far more on their cars than they would end up contributing to charity. Not so. Without fail, participants elected to give more to the cause than they spent on the cars because the cars were actually built for the cost of the parts, and the thousands of hours the teams lavished on them by top engineers and enthusiasts were all donated. In the fourth year, the average contribution to charity was \$7,500 per team. Not bad for a small town soapbox derby.

I built a trophy called "The Coveted Perpetual Trophy of Toast," which consisted of a tower of welded slices of nickel-plated cast iron toast. There were plenty of other trophies as well.



Kleiner Perkins Caufield & Byers was the biggest of the venture capital firms in the Valley and they were the ones to beat. KP was famous for getting the juiciest deals in the VC world, and they worked hard to take the trophy home. First place at the soapbox derby brought eternal majesty in the Sand Hill Challenge Hall of Fame and with it came power, prestige and glory as well as The Coveted Perpetual Trophy of Toast. Second place came with a 2-inch-tall plastic cup with the single word 'loser' crookedly stenciled across the middle.

The first year, the venture firm Mohr Davidow competed against Kleiner Perkins in the speed category with a car designed and assembled by Ideo, the preeminent industrial design firm responsible for the design of products from Caterpillar tractors to the Palm Pilot. The Mohr Davidow team was so intent on winning that they took it as seriously as a race for the



kleiner perkins and mohr davidow
race for toast

America's Cup. Their hard work paid off and they took the trophy home. The Mohr Davidow team promised to send the Kleiner team a trophy case for their second place cup, if they could find small enough hinges for the door.

Picture some pancake guy getting up on stage with the legendary 49er

football coach Bill Walsh and presenting a tiny trophy that said "loser" on it to this prestigious firm. It might have meant that I would soon be moving (once again to the upper Amazon), but Brook Byers accepted the trophy with the good humor that was intended. We owe a lot to Kleiner Perkins. This is the venture group in which John Doerr and his partners had the vision to back Netscape, Amazon, Sun, Compaq, Yahoo!, Intuit and hundreds of other successful firms.

Anatomy of a Wreck

In year five, Kleiner Perkins commissioned a most fantastic car from Edge Innovations. Edge is a company founded by Walt Conti. They built the robotic Free Willys, and all sorts of mechanical sharks and swordfish for the movies. Walt is cool for many reasons, not the least of which is that he gave me the snake head from the movie *Anaconda* for the wall at Buck's. The Edge had recently finished the movie *The Deep Blue Sea* and were experts at making full-sized sharks. The car they built was a magnificent racing mako shark with its mouth open, displaying row upon row of vicious teeth. The driver couldn't see out of the mouth very well, so they installed a video camera and he navigated the course by watching a small screen. The car was mighty dangerous looking, and it positively ripped down



walt conti and friends

the road. Unfortunately, the car was so fast that the driver couldn't see the finish line on the screen, and he was going nearly 50 mph through the run-out zone when he piled into the hay bales. He was thrown out through the shark's mouth and ripped up by the fiberglass teeth. It was heartbreaking to see that car wrecked, but the irony of being eaten in reverse by a shark was not lost on the driver, and he gave a remarkably cheerful interview on TV, considering the amount of blood streaming down his face.

The race ran for five years and grew bigger each year, like a zucchini plant next to a leaky plutonium dump. People came on foot, limo, horseback, tricycle, armored vehicle, and wheelchair. One fellow even parachuted in. Sure, we had venture capitalists, but we also had many of their portfolio companies. We had grandmas and babies and everyone in between. In the end, thousands of people worked on the teams and tens of thousands came to the races. We donated hundreds of thousands of dollars to expand the awareness of the epidemic of teenage drunk driving and I got to run my mouth for six straight hours. But like so much of our fun, the gloomy economic times of the early 21st century steamrolled the race along with everything else, and all we have left are about 11,000 T-shirts.



1,100 hours to build



10 minutes of racing



an eternity in buck's

Chapter 5.

BEACH PIRATES

I've met many of the most successful business people in the world at Buck's. Who didn't marvel at the phenomenon of 19-year-old boy geniuses way back in the dotcom era? Some did create sizable companies, but the boy genius thing is so over. Me, I started my first business when I was nine, so by nineteen I should have been halfway to my gold watch.

After a grueling winter sweep through New York, Massachusetts and Maine in the late '50s, my mother, Walter, Jane and I dropped anchor in Santa Monica. It was a time when America seemed sweetly benign. The tribulations of WW II were fading; boys were boys and girls were chicks—chicks who snapped their gum in time to Theresa Brewer and Fabian. Clothing fashions in the '50s were a bit scary perhaps and there was some distant war on in Korea, but what did we know about that? Back then boys had flat-top haircuts like the deck of an aircraft carrier and teenage girls sported ungainly beehive hairdos and wore pedal-pusher pants and soft-focus pink angora sweaters. Political correctness was way over the horizon and environmentalists hadn't started their incessant shrieking. During hunting season, even in the middle of LA, it was not an uncommon sight to see a station wagon driving through town with a couple of dead deer lashed across the hood, shot full of holes and dripping blood on the white-walls.

During the War, automobile production was halted for aircraft and tank manufacturing. But Detroit couldn't let it go, so they



sneaked mock-weapon motifs into some of their postwar cars. The early '50s Caddies featured twin chrome bombshells protruding from the grill; others sprouted the sleek features of aircraft. This proved so popular that, by the end of the decade, GM went flat-out for the jet fighter look. The 1959 Cadillac was equipped with multiple rows of 60-caliber bullets not so subtly composing the grillwork, fore and aft, and had convincing enough turbine air intakes and afterburners, as well as two pair of tail guns mounted to the fins that flashed red, and only

incidentally doubled as tail lights. The swept-back cockpit said to the world: "I am an ace who is going to blow your sorry village to kingdom come, *and* I can carry four sets of golf clubs and my buddies in air-conditioned comfort."

After the War, great dams rose up, vast forests were mowed down, and we aggressively paved the nation from coast to coast. The country had yet to awaken to the specter of its racist past and no one had ever heard of Vietnam. Back then, Lucille Ball was the typical American housewife, forever trying to trick her husband into buying her a fur coat. Schoolteachers smoked in classrooms. One couldn't help but notice, though, that the air was getting kind of bad, even outside the classroom. On some days, it was painful to take a breath. In Maine, schools closed when the snow got too deep, but in LA they would send us home from school when the air got too bad, advising us to stay indoors and try to avoid breathing.

When I was a kid, I was taught that rubber came from trees. Rubber from trees? I found this hard to believe. I was skeptical because when Jane and I would beg for a couple of quarters, Walter would look at us like the freeloaders we were and ask us if we thought that money grew on trees. Well if rubber came from trees, then why not money? I was pretty sure that money came from banks. If you had a job, I reasoned, the bank would let you have money. Walter would rarely kick in with the greenbacks and even if my mother was a softer touch, it was never enough. So Walter suggested that Jane and I go and get jobs. Fine with me. I should have no trouble getting a job, I thought. But when I asked around, my potential employers told me I was too young. "Come back in a few years," they said.

Then Jane and I found a big chunk of lead. We found the lead in an alley and it was as heavy as gold, so we spent the last of our ready cash on a can of gold spray paint then told the kids in the neighborhood that we had found a gold bar from Fort Knox. They all wanted this bar and one of them stole \$4.00 from his mother to buy it. He later had trouble coming up with a plausible excuse for coming home with a gold ingot and confessed in about eight seconds. We had to give the money back and they didn't even have the decency to return our bar so that we could resell it.

So Jane and I opened another business. We discovered that pop bottles were discarded as trash and we began to gather them up and take them to the Safeway to collect the redemption. We rooted through the trashcans in the alleys and scavenged the beach for bottles on weekends. The regular bottles were worth three cents and the quarts paid a whole nickel. On this we built an empire.

Jane and I would monitor groups of beach-goers with the cunning of an anthropologist tracking the roving Hottentot. For generations, Coke had been sold in impossibly small 6-oz bottles, but this was the modern world and they had introduced the more realistic 12-ouncer and the monster 32-ouncer, which could fix up an entire family. Only construction workers and cowboys would ever think of drinking an entire quart and they were not habitués of our beach. After someone had tossed the bottles as trash, they were fair game, but if you asked for the bottles as the beachgoers were packing up, you could at once lighten their load and have the entire batch to yourself. We could spot bottles being upended like they were three-cent sailfish leaping in the sun. Ka-ching! Sundays were the most profitable day of the week, and a good hot one was better still.

The beach from Malibu to Palos Verdes is the longest uninterrupted public beach in the world. Back then it was also the best bottle mine on the planet. We learned fast. Nehi was better than Coke because it had a thinner bottle. The quarts were worth more, but were heavier per penny. As we became more proficient, the paper bag we used became a box, and the box was soon replaced by a shopping cart. A kid pushing a shopping cart full of bottles was not an unusual sight back then.

My sister and I soon became rich, by our standards. We worked hard and lived large. We were regulars at the snow cone shop where all we had to do was say, "The usual." We designed a snow cone customized to our specifications with the same cocky confidence the local hoods displayed with the brilliantly painted hot rods we saw tooling through the alleys along the beach. A five-flavored snow cone is ephemeral art and the effect only lasts a few seconds until the colors merge. It took a real virtuoso to properly lay up all five. The trick was to line out the first three flavors, carefully preventing them from touching, then deftly flood the gaps. Our lips were stained from the infamous Red Dye #2 (later determined to be carcinogenic) from Saturday all the way until the middle of next week.

A broad sidewalk called The Strand meandered the length of the beach. Its periodic openings spilled sand onto the pavement on one side, homes and shops on the other. To us, The Strand was infinite. Even on bikes, we never reached its end and I still picture it disappearing into exotic lands over the horizon, the Appian Way of our childhood. We ranged as far as Venice, with its garbage-filled canals, the 1920s folly of real estate developers, to the shuttered aquarium near the ruined pier. By prying up a corner of the plywood barricade, we could roam this eerie world of empty fish tanks the size of small houses. We would sit in the sand inside the biggest tank, the roof fallen away above us, and imagine ourselves to be

mer-people with the tails of fish. I held up Jane's long hair, gently floating it in the lovely green sea.

We frequented Muscle Beach, which was then in its heyday. Vic Tanny, Herb Gold, Steve Reeves and Jack Lalanne all got their start there. We didn't know it at the time, but this was the birthplace of physical culture in America.

Sometimes we lurked at the door of a jazz club downtown until they chased us away. It was one of the earliest Beatnik joints. People hung out in front, using words like "cool" and "dig." Once, through the open doors, we saw a man in a black turtleneck with long, shiny sideburns playing a clarinet. He was gyrating from side to side while a woman with short red hair and white lipstick in tiger print hip-hugger pants sang *Wada wada wada!* into a microphone. We had no idea what *wada* meant but it became our theme song that summer. I decided right then that I wanted to play the clarinet, and I did take it up for a while but quit when it failed to deliver the cool I had hoped for.

Besides the pop bottles, the alleys around town were loaded with other great stuff. One time we found the breathtaking bottom half of a mannequin, its sex zone as smooth as the fender of a Hudson Hornet. We dragged home a cigar display case in perfect condition, and once I found the paper maché head of a tiger. Were people insane to toss out such riches? Imagine our surprise when we discovered that these things could not be turned into ready cash. Then one day we hit pay dirt. We found a large case of individual packages containing some unmentionable sort of underwear. We knew the natives would pay dearly for them if we could only figure out what they were. We had seen garter belts and the mysterious *brassiere* and these looked like a similar obscenity. The package gave us the idea that they were made for men, but we were mystified as to what their exact use could be. In desperation, we finally left one of the packages on a bus bench and waited. Eventually a woman picked it up. She turned to the man she was with and said, "Wow, a



"now, toss me the light bulb"

package of spits.” Jane turned to me with a knowing look, “Spits! Sure, I’ve heard of them. I knew it, I knew it, they’re spits!” We concluded



“riiight, spits”

that they were little hammocks to support a man’s whatnots. For years I wondered how a spit was worn and especially why they were sold in pairs. I would ask people offhandedly from time to time what a little buttoned ham-mock called a spit was used for, but never had any luck finding an answer. Eventually, I discovered that they were actually *spats*, the shoe coverings last worn by Scrooge McDuck.

Great, that only took about 30 years. I still have sooo many questions.

A shopping cart bristling with bottles looked like a load of trash to an adult, but to a kid it might as well be a gold-laden stage coming down from Sutter’s Mill. Bottles jammed in every workable position came up nearly level with our heads and we soon discovered that there was a balance between the value of the cargo and the possibility that a gang of brigands would swoop down from their stronghold to steal our hard-earned treasure. We went unmolested with small loads but as the value became worth noticing we were spotted by a local 5th grade warlord named Billy who lived above the Hamburger Heaven near the pier. He and his swarthy cohorts took everything one afternoon; we even had to find a new cart.

We had been back in business for a couple of weeks when Billy found us again. I still remember *The Great Battle* and its aftermath with the clarity generally reserved for wedding vows and assassinations. Every detail is cut in sharp relief. That day, as Billy and his posse drew near, we realized that these little mobsters had *no stinkin’ badges* and that we were heavily armed. The beach could be a dangerous place in 1957 but not because of sharks, sunstroke or drowning. The real threat was broken glass. We were very careful to avoid stepping on it, and on those rare occasions when we broke a bottle on the pavement, we always picked up the pieces (the biggest ones, anyway). Of course, the real danger lurked in the sand, since no one wore shoes.

So when Billy and his pals attacked on that fateful Sunday afternoon, the tide, the tables, and the hogs all turned. I’ve seen this phenomenon since and it is a grand sight to behold. It’s as simple as the change from slack to flood tide and every bit as powerful. As they hove to, we scurried to battle stations like gunnery swabbies on the battleship Bismarck. We were willing to violate the laws of human decency and the code of the beach by counterattacking with glass bottles to rid ourselves of these thugs for all time.

Pig 1 and Pig B Wise Up

A tide of hogs once turned on our dog Lucy many years later. Our next-door neighbor Doug had a couple of little pigs named Pig 1 and Pig B. He got them when they were the size of cats and they used to come over to our place every day to see if they could score some cat food or fallen fruit. Lucy delighted in chasing them home. It was a most excellent sight to see this immense Great Dane chasing those squealing delinquents back over the hill. Lucy would return in triumph, smiling, as only a happy dog can smile. One day I was in the garden throwing windfall apples over the fence when Pig 1 and Pig B came over the rise to have at the apples. Lucy bounded out of the house and before they could tuck in, they reeled, shrieking, and took off towards home. Then a most curious thing happened. As if by prearrangement, they both stopped and turned to look at one another, then spun round and took out after the now-startled dog. They were no longer little Pig 1 and Pig B but a powerful infantry of hos-tile ham, collectively weighing in at over 300 lbs. They ran that dog all the way back into the house, forever finishing the game.

Those pigs came to a tragic end later, though, when they broke into Doug's house. One of my sons was supposed to be looking after Doug's place in his absence over a weekend, but the kid failed to notice that the pigs had worked open a sliding glass door and had run into Doug's bedroom, where they managed to push the door shut behind them. They weren't discovered for a couple of days and although they didn't die there the episode did lead to their demise. We now know that hogs will eat table lamps, cashmere and first editions of *East of Eden*.

A Hires Root Beer quart bottle exploding at an adversary's bare feet is a terrific sight. A half a dozen might even be lethal. In fact, it *was* lethal to our enterprise because, although we drove Billy and his friends off, we were left in a sea of broken glass to face the howling wrath of the grownups who poured out of the beachfront trinket shops, chasing us like so many hogs over a hill. We had lost the mother lode. It was the end of the day; the beach mines were exhausted. We slunk back and worked the tailings, but the yield was so meager that it couldn't possibly keep us in candy and comics for the entire week that loomed ahead.

We had developed a pretty spendific lifestyle by this time, and our sudden poverty made us feel awfully bleak. Closing time at the Safeway was approaching as we carried our meager haul of bottles to the store. We felt like destitute urchins as we walked down the alley, looking longingly at the racks of returned bottles behind the chain link fence. There must have been millions of bottles in there, maybe even billions. We beheld this vast treasure with the round-eyed wonder Howard Carter must

have felt when he busted down the door to Tutankhamen's tomb. Even as a child, I knew he was in it for the loot when he declared that the sacred site in The Valley of the Kings had been overlooked by those despicable grave robbers, and then proceeded to dive right in and plunder the tomb himself. Wait a minute: if a hundred feet of solid mountain didn't stop Howard, would a mere chain link fence stop us? Ha!

I was a nimble, skinny kid, and made short work of scaling the fence. I was soon slipping bottles to my accomplice. I hid between the rows of cases as Jane ferried armloads of bottles around to the front of the store. Because we were a familiar sight there, this caused no alarm and we kept at it until the store closed. Then I went back over the fence to freedom and my half of nearly five dollars. Five dollars to a couple of kids in the '50s was just about enough to buy a house or a yacht. What we should have done was to buy stock in General Electric, but what we did instead was go to Ruynon's Market and indulge ourselves in Abba Zabbas, Jujubes, cream soda, Superman, Archie and His Friends, and a large bag of cherries for our mother.

In a few short weeks, we had graduated from hard working beach miners to elegant thieves.

Sadly, before we could milk this run for all it was worth, we moved house again and suddenly found ourselves in Enid, Oklahoma. The beach, with its rainbow of umbrellas and a pot of gold under each one, had been switched in the night for tumbleweed and hardscrabble. We couldn't have felt any more alienated than if we had moved to the dark side of the moon. No one ever threw out a bottle with a price on its head in Oklahoma. Stealing them would get you fifteen-to-life, if there had been any to steal. We felt as unwelcome as table dancers at a Sunday school, but because we moved so incessantly we knew it would only be a matter of time before we washed up on the beach once again.



Chapter 6.

**"DONNER, PARTY OF SIX,
YOUR TABLE'S READY....
OH, FOUR NOW?
HEY, SORRY FOR THE
WAIT."**

A fella came into Buck's one evening and when I stopped by his table to say hello, he asked if I had tied my tie.

Now, I'm generally not a tie sort of person, but now and then I'll wear a tie of such transcendent poor taste that it makes grown men weep and children run for cover. "I did tie this tie," I answered.

The man took me by the hand and said, "Well, that is a well-tied tie. I like a man who knows how to tie a tie." With this enormous economy of language, he completely drew me into his world. We discussed the 1939 World's Fair on Treasure Island in San Francisco. My new friend had been there. I mentioned the Pan Pacific Exposition, an immense affair in San Francisco commemorating the opening of the Panama Canal in 1915. He had been there, too, and he described some of the exhibits, such as the actual working Model T Ford assembly line and the kids' rides in The Zone. I asked him where he was from, and he said Hollister, California. I knew he must be in his '90s and, since he was from the Salinas Valley, I asked him if he had ever met John Steinbeck. He said he had seen the man, on occasion.

I introduced myself and asked his name.

"I'm Stanford Steinbeck," he said.

"So, you did know John Steinbeck, then, eh?"

"Why, yes. He was my cousin. We grew up together." This grand character was fooling with me. I liked it.

Stanford's mother was in the first class that admitted women to Stanford University, hence his name. Stanford has brilliant blue eyes and a flashing smile that says, "Come sit a spell, and let's get to know each other." When Stanford was a kid you cranked cars, phones and movie cameras to get them going. He certainly remembers those things, but this is a man who dwells in the present.

About a year after I met Stanford, a man named Mario dropped by. Mario asked me if I would consider carrying his wine. We sat down

and I explained that we never change the wine list because it is sort of fixed in time and besides, being a family restaurant we aren't much of a wine joint.

Mario Perelli-Minetti's face crinkled up into a shy smile. He smoothly shot out his cuffs. Monogrammed cufflinks peeked out from his impeccable suit sleeves and caught the light. Cufflinks in 2002? OK, I'll carry your wine.

Mario has been in the wine business for over 90 years. Little Mario's father paid him 10 cents a day at the age of four to jump around on grapes. He claims that his feet are still red today. I soon discovered that Mario had lived around the area for his entire life and had attended Stanford University.

"So Mario," I said, "do you remember Stanford Steinbeck?"

He looked at me with interest. "Certainly, I remember him. He was the student body president in 1930. Everyone knew Stanford."

I said, "Well I know him too, he lives right down the street."

Mario looked at me and said, "Now isn't that something. I haven't seen Stanford, in...72 years."

Next thing I knew, they were in for lunch, all 189 years of them. It seems that Mario was also a legacy at Stanford and his father went to school with Stanford's mother. Back in the 1890s, Mario's future father-in-law was part of the four-man relay on the Stanford track team. As a gag, someone handed him an axe instead of a baton and he quickly handed it off to the Cal runner. This began a tradition, now over 100 years old, in which the winner of The Big Game (the Cal Berkeley/Stanford football game) holds onto the axe for a year. I've heard different versions of this story but this is the one I like.



mario and stanford

The three of us discussed matters both deep and shallow. I asked them if they recalled ever seeing the great airship Macon. The Macon was over four times larger than the Goodyear blimp and anyone who ever saw it during its short life back in the '30s remembers it. Stanford said he had seen several dirigibles, but the only one that stuck with him was when he saw the Hindenburg go down in 1937. "Stanford," I said incredulously. "You were there for the Hindenburg?"

"Oh, yes," he said. "Quite a dramatic sight, as I recall."

Stanford pulled gently at the leaves of his artichoke. "You know, Mario," he said, "you married the prettiest girl at Stanford."

Mario nodded and looked down at his quesadilla, "Yes, and she was also the smartest."

After lunch they slowly made their way across the parking lot to Mario's car, two old friends meeting again. People tell me all the time that I have the best job in the world.



"so, after being prime minister of israel, you get the nobel peace prize and then breakfast at buck's. cool."

Of course famous people also come in from time to time, but it is a bit harder to plop down in the seat next to them and start picking at their French fries because everyone wants a piece of them. Especially movie stars. Movie stars just want to be treated like real people even if they really are American royalty.

Shirley Temple Black lives in the neighborhood. I had seen her on several occasions at Buck's with her husband. I always left her alone because the last thing she needed was me bursting into song and jitter-bugging past her table. But after seeing her three times in one month, I

thought that I had better say hello, so I drifted nonchalantly over to her table as if I was checking for breadcrumbs. I looked at her and said, "I know who you are."

"Oh, you do, do you?" she said.

"Indeed. You're Deanna Durbin, aren't you?" I get people mixed up all the time both accidentally and on purpose, but I knew she wasn't Deanna Durbin. I'm probably the only one under 65 not named Durbin who has ever even heard of Deanna Durbin. Durbin was an actress that a rival studio put up against the teenage Shirley Temple in an attempt to blow Shirley's cinematic boat out of the water. I had seen both actresses' movies, but although Deanna had a spectacular, glass-shattering soprano, her acting was all ham sandwich and she sank beneath the footlights and eventually even the footnotes.

Shirley gave me a startled look and then she realized I was fooling with her. Shirley Temple Black is an authentic household name. She is everything that Zsa Zsa Gabor is not.

Shirley vs. Zsa Zsa

Shirley

- *One first name*
- *Sang, danced, could act up a storm*
- *Academy Award, adored by millions*
- *Married once or twice, so far*

- *US ambassador to Czechoslovakia, Ghana & the UN*
- *A sweet, kind lady*
- *Believes me to be handsome and funny*

Zsa Zsa

- *Two first names*
- *Ham sandwich*
- *Adored by me*
- *Married 8 times to 7 guys, so far*
- *Did 3 days for police brutality*
- *See chapter 2*
- *See chapter 2*

I thought it rather grand that I should be speaking with her while at the same time soft drinks called Shirley Temples (7-Up and grenadine with a cherry) were being delivered to the kids all around the restaurant. In the '30s, some brilliant publicist took a drink called The Pussyfoot, which was already popular, and renamed it the Shirley Temple. The name stuck.

Roy Rogers wasn't about to be left behind on the publicity front. I can imagine how it must have gone. Roy's Publicist: "Darn tootin'! Why didn't I think of this sooner? Hopalong Cassidy has the chocolate milk market sewn up. The baseball guys have the Wheaties box. We need more than toy guns and cowboy clothes! I've got it, I've got it. How about a drink called the Roy Rogers?" (Coke, grenadine and a cherry). While not exactly a PR disaster, it sure looked like he was trying to ride in on a little girl's coattails.

I've always been a big fan of Roy Rogers. My Aunt Red once actually waited on him at the drugstore. Roy was a big movie star when I was a kid and my aunt sold the man Bromo Seltzer and a box of Band-Aids. My six-year-old brain had no trouble deconstructing this exchange. The Band-Aids were for his hands, which were no doubt worn away from his oft-repeated stunt of swinging from a running horse up into a tree so that he could drop down and surprise the bad guys.

My aunt explained that Bromo came in a blue bottle and people took it for upset stomachs. She said that she even had some and showed me the bottle. It was clear to me that because Roy was such a good guy, he was sick to his stomach from all the criminals he was forced to gun down every day. Sure, that was it! I'll bet he shared the Bromo with his wife, Dale Evans, who shot her share of bad guys, too. In fact, the entire family was an effective killing machine.

I was a little confused over the fact that Dale's last name was different than Roy's, but I was more troubled by the eventuality that I



me in my bat masterson
phase with aunt red

would soon be venturing forth into a world loaded with pistol-packing criminals. I figured that I had better fortify myself against the eventual gun battles I fully expected to be part of, and so I waited until everyone was outside and then I opened the Bromo bottle and ladled a near fatal dose into my mouth. What a rush! Seconds later, I came streaking across the backyard, foaming at the mouth like a rabid badger.

Even if Roy had been my tutor in how to conduct myself in my future life on horseback with my six-guns (and a keen eye toward using 'em), in the end I became a comparatively dull family man. I haven't shot anybody, so far. I never forgot, however, that in some vague way, I owed Roy something—or was it Roy who owed me? This connection eventually prompted me to tie up at the same hitching post as my hero. My friend Roxy Rapp and I dropped in on him at his museum in Apple Valley, California

a few weeks before I opened Buck's. The Roy Rogers Museum is dedicated to the Rogers family, with an emphasis on Roy and Dale's TV and movie careers and their remarkable collection of stuffed family pets. Roy's dog Bullet is there, as is Buttercup, Dale's horse. Buttercup looks springtime fresh but smells a bit like, well, an old horsehide. Even Dale's dog is stuffed. Roy didn't think it at all strange to have had his magnificent palomino, Trigger, filled with wood shavings and saddled up, ready to ride, and he joked with us about the possibility that Dale would eventually stuff him for display. Hey, he said it, not me!

Their parade saddles are on display, too, colorfully fabricated out of automotive upholstery vinyl so that the smart stitching would show up on TV. The family's silver dollar encrusted station wagon (with pistol handles and Winchester rifles mounted to the hood) is hitched up to the family trailer (I could certainly relate to that). Roy's good taste shone through in a real nice pair of high top tennis shoes with cowboy boot heels.

I had been thinking of calling my restaurant *Trigger's*, which is why I have a large painting of Trigger with Roy and Dale (dogs and sidekicks in tow) as the centerpiece at Buck's. I thought it would be nifty if we had a grand opening kick-off by having a Trigger look-alike contest and get the palominos in the neighborhood together with the

local kids and maybe (and here was the big ask) get Roy to come and judge which horse most resembled Trigger. Roy sat back in his chair and closed his eyes, going over the possibilities. "First," he said, "I'm happy that you would consider honoring that horse. Trigger was the smartest horse in the world and I never found his equal. It would be all right with me if you called your place Trigger's." He paused. "But I think that if you get a lot of strange horses together in a parking lot with a whole passle (he really said passle) of kids, you'll have a real kick-off, all right."



roy forever

DOZENS OF CHILDREN TRAMPLED AT NEW RESTAURANT, I could see the headline. Roxy and I felt that we had certainly come to the right place and asked the right question. Eventually I picked another name, but it was great to finally meet Roy. I can tell you this: he still had the hands of a horseman and his reputation for being generous with his time was true.

People sometimes ask where the name Buck's came from. I can say that the idea of 'bucks' as in money never crossed my mind. If it had, I would have called the place Goldman Sachs. There had been a previous restaurant called The Stagecoach at our location and I wanted to keep the Old West theme going. We needed something Wild-Westly and I conjured up an old cowboy and called him Buffalo Dick. I was set to name the place after him. I told my wife, Margaret, that I wanted to call the restaurant "Buffalo Dick's." She said fine, but she did not wish to be involved. Wait a minute. I thought we were a team! She said we were, right up until I put the Buffalo Dick's sign up. I had to rethink the matter. In the end, I just abbreviated it.



Some of our visitors are rather famous but aren't actually people. A man called me one day and said that he owned the Declaration of Independence. "Sure you do," I said, "Would you hold, please? I have King Kamehameha on the other line." Actually he did own the Declaration of Independence. The original quill pen job by Tom Jefferson is in the Capitol Building, but there were about 300 typeset

copies printed on July 4th, 1776. These went to public buildings like post offices, spat shops and casinos. Only 24 of these were known to still exist until 1991, when someone saw a nice frame at a flea market and discovered that a 25th copy had been neatly folded behind the picture. The guy paid \$4 for the whole thing. He later sold his copy for over a million bucks *and* got to keep the frame.

This copy was going to be sold through Sotheby's Online and it was touring the country prior to the auction. The man who owned it said he had a contract with Sotheby's to handle all aspects of the sale. The Sotheby people were not amused at the idea of this sacred document being paraded through some flapjackery in the sticks but they checked us out and decided it wasn't such a bad place after all, so we displayed it in the



“when in the course of human events blah-blah-blah”

back room and the press gave it wide coverage. As customers came in I would say, “Guess what? I have The Declaration of Independence back by the kitchen door.”

“Sure, and I’m Benjamin Franklin,” they would say. But when they saw the men in suits and the guards, they figured it was either a very elaborate joke or the real goods. The Sotheby's people were pretty happy with the result because Norman Lear, the producer, saw the press reports and eventually bought it for eight million and that didn't include framing. Norman has made it the central focus of his traveling exhibition promoting free speech through his organization, People For The American Way, and now it's on permanent tour in the sticks.



Chatting with so many different folks has given me a pretty good handle on the way people are wired. For instance, I consider myself a baby expert. I see far more babies than most pediatricians do and I don't ever recall seeing a bad baby. First-time parents with a tiny baby are such suckers. I often ask, “Is this your baby?” They generally say no, they just found the little bum. Or I'll ask, “First one?” and they'll be amazed at my perspicacity. It isn't so hard to spot a first-born. They

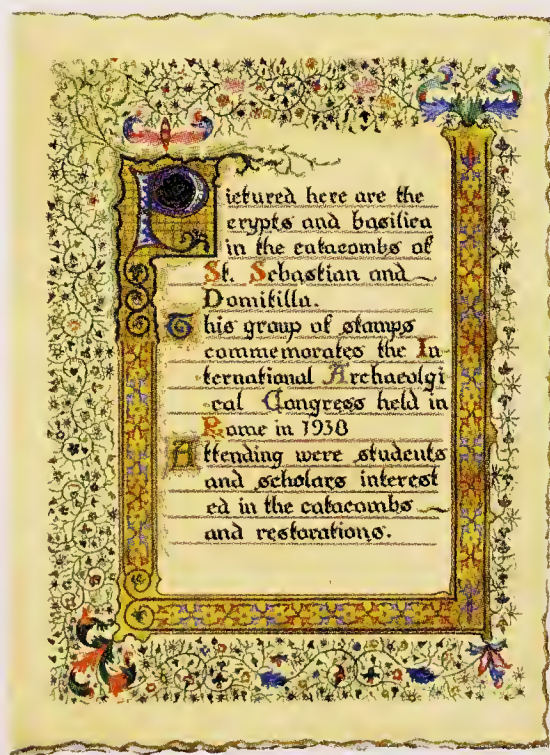
cruise about in \$500 strollers festooned with toys from Neiman Marcus, matching accessory bags, onboard kitchen and toilet facilities, GPS navigation and wireless internet. Then there's the goggle-eyed silliness that babies require for communication. It seems you can't even speak to the *parents* in a normal tone of voice. You find yourself moving up at least one octave for parents and then up one more when talking to the baby. Babies are easily amused and they think it's amazingly funny when they shake a fist in the air and the huzzas pour in from the crowd for this extraordinary maneuver. I'd like to thank the parents who have the good sense to dress their babies in pink or blue. Since all babies look like the androgynous descendants of Dwight Eisenhower, that color code is darn handy.

Sophie Sings the Blues

A little old lady arrived one day by cab and said that she had to see me. She might have been about 90 and she was rather frail and a bit hard-of-hearing. She told me that she had her father's books and wanted to sell them and that I was just the one to give her a lot of money for them. She described them to me and I must have looked like a cartoon of a guy spinning his legs in reverse. But she had me by the shirt-tails so I stayed put.

She said they were heavy so I had to come out to the cab and bring them in for her and then she sent the cab away. Wow, she was good. It reminded me of Cortez burning his ships when he invaded Mexico

so troops couldn't retreat. What I saw inside made my eyes bulge and my hair stand on end. What she had were three exquisite leather and



brassbound books with pages for collecting the stamps of the Vatican. Sophie Maxwell laid the first book on the table and told me to open it. In 1929 the Vatican in Rome opened its post office and the book-maker collected each stamp it issued until 1961. He collected the stamps in the book and illuminated the pages holding the stamps with finely detailed paintings. The obverse pages have impeccable calligraphic lettered stories that tell about the saint or Pope depicted on each stamp.

Sophie narrated as I turned the pages. I was amazed at what I was hearing.



600 rooms riv vu Sophie said that her father arrived at Ellis Island in 1899 when he was six. He grew up in Hell's Kitchen and eventually became a stonemason and spent most of his life working on the Church Cathedral of St. John The Divine on the Upper West Side (still unfinished after 130 years). Giuseppe Moreno was a small, pudgy fellow and Sophie said her father's hands looked like swollen mittens when he came in from a cold winter day. But from those hands, such work!

After dinner he would go to his study (really just an enlarged closet in his apartment), and work on his books, shutting Sophie and her mother out. If he wasn't at work he was with his books, "Always with his books," she said, shaking her head sadly. Giuseppe was not remembered fondly. He was one page into a fourth book when he died. Sophie and her mother sold the most valuable stamps, which in the '60s brought in only a few hundred dollars. The bulk of the stamps are worth less than ten dollars even today. All that remains is one man's glorious vision of the Vatican, a Vatican that he never actually visited.

Giuseppe had no friends; he barely noticed his family and he never produced any other works of art. Like a violinist practicing a piece of music, Giuseppe would practice hour after hour, for days, weeks and years, perfecting each page before calling it done. He averaged one page every 2 1/2 months. But unlike the violinist, he never showed people his work. The books have rarely ever been opened.

I am crazy about outsider art but there was no way I could afford something of this caliber. I told Sophie she should consult book dealers or museums. She said she had, but that they had no interest because the books were so odd. That, and she didn't want to spend time on these books, which she saw as the instrument of alienation between her and her father. As our tea cooled I offhandedly floated a guess at a price. She doubled it. We drove to the bank. I paid her and drove her back to her nursing home. It had been upsetting for her to have to deal with these books so we agreed that I would visit her later and she would give me as much more of the family history as she could. But she kept putting me off and a few weeks later she died.





"if i were a rich man, dida, dida, dida
dida, dum..."

similar black wallet with the photograph. Everyone thought that it was Warren's wallet even though it doesn't actually say so. The caption reads, "The secret of my success is that whenever I meet a billionaire I ask him for his wallet."

The local paper picked up the story of the wallet and someone sent the article to Warren. What I should have gotten was a stern letter from his legal department slapping me around and demanding that I take down the wallet but instead I got this.

Warren's straightforward good humor forced me to come clean and maybe he will put my mea culpa letter in his memoirs. I have since amended the text in the frame to read: "this is not Warren Buffett's wallet" but no one believes me.

The rich and famous take a beating in the press all the time. The fact is that most of the terrible things you read about them are not true and are just spun to feed some folks' need to bring down the high and mighty. Famous people do many of the same things normal people do. When Julia

Of course it isn't all fun and games. Or is it? Once Warren Buffett came to town. The Sage of Omaha is a bit of a joker and an all-right guy. Warren and I were mugging for the camera and he pretended to hand me his wallet. Nice joke from the second wealthiest man in the world. Of course, I gratefully took it, but he sort of wanted it back and I thought I had better give it to him. It was too good a joke to let drop, so I framed a

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WARREN E. BUFFETT, CHAIRMAN

December 1, 2000

Mr. Jamis MacNiven
Buck's
3062 Woodside Road
Woodside, CA

Dear Mr. MacNiven:

A couple of friends have sent me a copy of an article indicating that I sent you a wallet. Of course, we had our picture taken together, but if you received a wallet in the mail from someone purporting to be me they were deceiving you.

I've only had two wallets in the last 20 years. One belongs to John Morgan, who bought it at a charity auction, and the other one is in my pocket.

I really would appreciate it if you would leave the picture up but take away any attribution of the wallet to me. John paid \$210,000 for the real one.

Sincerely,

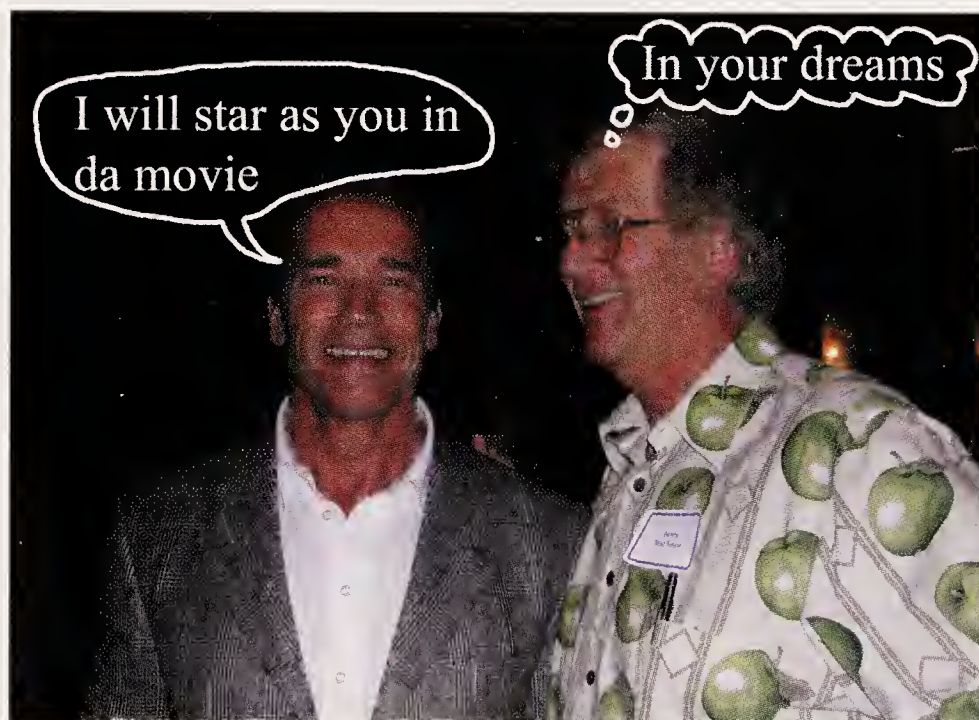
Warren E. Buffett

WEB/db

cc: John Morgan

Roberts went to use the women's room at Buck's, I had a fantasy of putting the toilet seat on the wall with a sign to memorialize the event but even I have to draw the line somewhere.

I like to think it's our homey atmosphere that brings out the best in people. Once there was an article in *Fortune* magazine that named the nine power restaurants in the nation, and Buck's was included with places like Trotter's in Chicago and The Grill in Beverly Hills. When I had my initial meeting with Zsa Zsa's agent at The Grill, we were seated at a small table in the middle of the dining room. I left for a minute and when I came back the agent and the restaurant manager were talking. The agent told him that I was a somebody and the poor manager blanched, explaining we would have been given a better table if he had ahh...errr... known. He explained that his regulars grind on him for the 'right table' and that it simply wasn't possible to keep everybody happy. I smiled, looking around at the aging producers at the power tables with their bouncing, sparkling starlets. Some of these guys were packing about two pounds of gold in pinkie rings alone. Our table was fine; Gwyneth Paltrow was sitting at the 2-top next to us.



The only real complainer at Buck's was Johnny Depp, who screamed that there were ticks in his food (I think he was just going through a phase. Plus, we never cook with ticks; they are more expensive than truffles.) Larry Ellison (always one of the top ten richest men in the world) once tipped 100 percent of his bill, Bill Gates (always *the* richest guy in the world) grabbed the check from an associate who was attempting to pay, and the perennially snarling Norman Mailer signed an autograph. It's hard to write scathing sizzle about these folks if they insist on acting like this.

Sometimes famous people are just begging to be messed with, though, and the real test of cool is how they act when you enter their 'zone.' A few years ago, after prison and before he started eating his opponents, Mike Tyson came into the restaurant. This is one fearsome dude. If you think he's scary on TV, just try standing next to him in real life. He was sitting with a half a dozen of his people at our big table in the back on a quiet

afternoon. They ate like it was the last supper and the bill for lunch was a couple of hundred dollars. I presented the bill, and said to Mike, "I'll arm wrestle you for the check." He smiled. "All right by me." He planted his arm on the table and the guy next to him slid out of his way. I'm pretty big, and with my sleeves rolled down I *could* have been a contender. I know something about arm and wrist wrestling because a good friend, Jim Pollock, was the world wrist-wrestling champion for many years and he was two-thirds the size of some of his opponents. I was pretty sure that Mike didn't necessarily have an exact bead on me. We gripped up and I looked into his notoriously incandescent eyes. I put all I had into it but he smoothly pushed my arm over and tapped my knuckles lightly on the table. Resistance was futile. He could have put me completely through the oak, but he took it easy on me and his manager left a rather grand tip for the server.

There is one local big shot, though, who has avoided Buck's all these years.

I was a building contractor before I opened Buck's. I had exactly one job behind me when I got a call from a guy who said he wanted someone to remodel his house in the hills above Los Gatos. I drove up to see him early one Saturday morning, and he showed me around a small, unremarkable house. Even though he claimed to live there, the only thing that could be called furniture was a mattress on the floor that he shared with his girlfriend Barbara. In one of the second-floor bedrooms, he had a computer sitting on the floor. It was 1979, and I had never seen a personal computer before. With great enthusiasm, he demonstrated that if you had a row of numbers along the top and a column along the side you could input data and get a result. Big deal. I asked him how many employees he had and he said 350. I had two employees. Perhaps this computer thing was a bigger deal than I thought.

I remember the night when Steve Jobs, Barbara, the architect and I were going over the remodel plans at Maddalena's Restaurant, a snitzy Italian joint in Palo Alto. We had the plans spread out on the table and they served us dinner right on top of the blueprints. Steve was delighted with the possibilities and at that dinner he asked the architect and me to help him create a lifestyle. Steve is not known as one who likes to take direction from others (especially someone as clueless as I was then), so this was not destined to work.

At first we were tight; we hung out together. When my second son was born, Barbara came up with the name Tyler. We went to a local pizzeria for Steve's 25th birthday and we were all standing on his front porch when we learned that John Lennon had died.

Margaret and I lived in the woods nearby, and Barbara and Steve would occasionally come up for a hike and dinner. One of my neighbors had a stunning house with soaring tent-like parabolic roofs and great free-form woodwork indicative of the '70s. This was Peter Calthorpe's first house. He went on to be a notable architect, eventually designing the town depicted in *The Truman Show*. We walked over and found the owner, Stephano, at his drafting table working on some blueprints and asked him if he would show us around. He said he was pretty busy but that we were free to wander around by ourselves. So we looked the place over, said so long, and headed home. Later Stephano asked me who it was we had been with. When I told him he seemed to crumple a bit. It seems that Steve was the one person in the entire world Stephano really wanted to meet. He was trying to impress us by working on a Sunday, he said.

As the Jobs' job progressed, we started having problems. They seem laughable now, but they were serious enough then. Steve was in the process of taking Apple Computer public during the remodel. Here was a 25-year-old on the cover of *Time Magazine*, being touted as the youngest, richest, self-made man in history. In 1980, that came to around 750 million dollars. A lot of money back then. Steve drove a Mercedes 240 D in those days. Since he had his pick of any car in the world, it became hard to zero in on one. What he learned later is that there is no perfect car. You need at least six.



When we first started working on the house, we were treated as if we were part of a commune. But hundreds of millions of dollars and all those magazine covers later, combined with the pressure of work, and Steve's hippie roots got a real workout. Communes all eventually fail and I admit that I was a very green builder.

But we did have some pretty funny times. We were once in a vast antique store that had an excellent medieval suit of armor. The Disney people had previously offered Steve whatever animatronic gear he could make use of, and we tossed around the idea of an armor clad robotic butler clanking around the house. It turned out that that sort of thing was decades in the future. With so much to do at Apple where he and his people were authentically changing modern culture it is remarkable that he valiantly tried to manage his home remodel at the same time. It takes a great deal of an owner's time to remodel a house, and that person has to rely on the design and construction team to get the job

done. We looked more like a Chevy Chase movie than a home remodeling team.

The designer had a bizarre kitchen tile plan that entailed hiring a tile artist who would make the tiles on site to exactly fit the counters, then glaze them in the living room before sending them out for firing. There was also the great debate as to whether or not to have a shower door in the master bath. Everyone took a position, and it was clear from the exit polls that Steve's Shower Door Party would lose the popular vote even if he did prevail in the Electoral College.

The whole job was like this. After a year all of us were worn out. The house now held four pieces of furniture, but Steve was still sleeping on the floor.

Steve never knew how close he came to ending up as the *shortest-lived* youngest, richest, self-made man in history. We had a carpenter on the crew who had been a boat builder. Sean was a big beast of an Englishman, colorful, skillful and completely out of control. He was supposed to nail on some door trim but he chose to use slotted brass screws instead of nails, which he laid out with fanatical precision. These, in turn, were covered with grain-matched wood plugs. He then meticulously sanded the doorjambs until they practically glowed. Sean was proud of this wildly overdone installation. When Steve saw the work, he turned to me and said that we should just paint over the whole thing. Sean grabbed a 1/4-inch chisel and lunged at Steve from behind. I must have looked alarmed, because Steve furrowed his brow at me and patiently explained that the concept of paint shouldn't be beyond my grasp. Fortunately, Steve never turned around to stare death in the face. Sean would have planted the chisel in Steve's spine if two other carpenters hadn't restrained him. I ran the lunatic off. A couple of weeks later, Steve's phone bill showed up with \$550 worth of calls to Sean's girlfriend in the Seychelles.

A doorknob finally brought the job to a close. The designer had specified a \$75 doorknob for the side door, which was Steve's primary access point. The knob rattled a bit when you grabbed it. Steve told me he didn't want a rattling knob. I argued with him because this is what the designer had speced. "Hey Steve, learn to live with mediocrity. The rest of us do." Steve might not have been able to pick out the ideal car, but knew for damn sure that he didn't want a rattling doorknob.

We parted company around then and I was mad at him for years for not being a better client, but now I realize that I wasn't up to the job.

So Steve, let me buy you breakfast. You were right; I had a lot to learn.

Chapter 7.

GUNS, BOMBS, AND HIGH SCHOOL FOOTBALL

High school was as dismal a hallucination for me as it was for most of us. On the one hand, I was on the football and wrestling team. At the opposite end of the universe, I hung out with a group of intellectual dissidents-without-agenda. It was this latter group who would eventually turn into hippies while the former became everybody else.

On the football team, I was the stick component of the coach's carrot-and-stick approach. The coach would brandish me at the first-string center threatening to replace him with me. The goal was to keep the center in line, and in line he stayed. For years. My reward was a grand total of one play in the last season. The coach would occasionally look at me and shake his head woefully. What was up with that? I blocked, I ran, I yelled for enemy blood. Apparently I lacked what Coach called "desire." I had no idea what that word meant. "Hey Coach, I'm here aren't I? What more do you want?" There were players who were far smaller than me, but were much tougher for some reason. They mowed down those unlucky enough to get in their way with the dedication of severely undermedicated lunatics. The star guard was Red Butts. That was his real name. He spent summers at a camp called the Devil Pups, which was a training camp for Marine Corps wannabes.

A transformation took place between 1964 when I entered high school as a crew cut freshman and 1967, when Dylan had his *Subter-*

anean Homesick Blues and Jim Morrison advised us to "follow me down, just follow me down." I felt as if the planet had flipped its poles. I wasn't the only one who thought so. *Lucy in the Sky With Diamonds* really was about LSD. Whether *Puff the Magic Dragon* was a drug song or not didn't matter; there were plenty of others. I didn't pay any attention to the profound changes going on all around me until the summer when I was released from high school after serving four years. I needed to get a



innocent



guilty

job until I started at L.A. State in the fall, and landed one manufacturing TV sets at a Ford Philco plant. This was rich, considering my unholy relationship with TV. My friend Mouse had just gotten a job there, so I applied too.

During the interview, they asked if I had any political views. Political views? The fact that I had lived next to about 25 military bases seemed to make the interviewer happy and I went to work. We had to sign up with the United Auto Workers Union and even I knew it was run by the mob. The Mob. Cool. I had expected to be standing on a long assembly line, turning a single screw, like in the movies, but instead Mouse and I ended up in a corner of the plant where small control panels were rolled into the room, fussed with, and then rolled out again. We were shown how to clean a panel with transistors all over it and then dip it in plastic and hang it on a rack to cure. There must have been an insatiable demand for TVs, because we worked the night shift as if there was a war on. The big event of the evening was the dinner break where we would explore the many machines that dispensed ice cream, exhausted grey hamburgers and every variety of candy. Our faces started to deteriorate in short order, and we began a nightly ritual of dousing ourselves with the same alcohol with which we cleaned the electronic parts. We were the rare males in this largely female environment and we got a kick out of listening to the women complain about their loutish husbands. They seemed pretty old, but I'll bet most were under 30.

As I was passing through part of the plant one evening, I looked through a door at the machine shop where giant lathes and colossal stamping machines were sitting idle. They only ran during the day. A machine shop apprentice job paid 75 cents more an hour, the equipment looked like it would be great fun to operate, and I would be able to work during the day. I asked for a transfer. One of the union stewards took me in the next afternoon while the machines were rolling to introduce me to the shop foreman.

I immediately saw that what was being manufactured were not Philcomatic 12-channel TV sets. We were making bombs. Big ones. Today I can't imagine why I didn't figure it out sooner. That evening I mentioned to my girlfriend Carol that I wasn't making TVs but bombs, which were being supplied to the war in Vietnam. She was absolutely horrified. "Don't you know what's going on over there?" she screamed. Well, I really hadn't given it much thought. I had no TV; newspapers didn't



carol

interest me. She and I spent most of our time in pursuits other than talking, so I naturally hadn't been paying any attention to the outside world. This girl managed to pry my eyes open a bit using the tried and true Lysistrata technique (look it up), and I promptly quit the job. Then, amazingly, my hair started to grow. Blame it on rock n'roll. As my hair grew, it freed up space in my brain and I soon realized that there was a war on and that people I knew from high school were being killed in Asia. Red Butts was one of the first to go. Mark Simms, the center perennially in front of me, came home in a wheelchair, where he would remain.

Me, I got another job. It paid less and was at night, but instead of making bombs I carried racks of plates to hand decorators and then moved them to the glazing room and eventually to the vast outdoor kilns. I sort of hated to give up my affiliation with The Mob, but some things aren't meant to be.

During the last couple of years of high school, I had been living in a good neighborhood in a house that overlooked the sea. Now I found myself going to school during the day, working at night and living in a rickety 19th century tenement. The flimsy wood wall that separated me from my immediate neighbor didn't block the creaking and banging around by this part-time hooker who had bad teeth and two kids. Yikes!

Today guns and bombs fail to amuse me and are possibly even dangerous, but it was a different story back in college. When I was a student at Berkeley, there was a character named Bryan Bryan who lived under the basement of the house I ran. This tumbledown cruise ship of a house had been divided into about 20 rooms, and I rented them out for about \$40 a month. When Bryan Bryan got tossed out of the University for stealing a laser, he burrowed into the crawl space and lined it with aluminum foil to thwart eavesdroppers. He pictured himself a righteous part of The Revolution that we all were sure was right around the corner. Bryan Bryan had a lot of creative ideas, like the time he decided to start a university to compete with the University of California. He printed up a brochure and offered seven different subjects, all of which he would teach. These ranged from *Spanish* to his version of *The History of Absolutely Everything*. Hardly anyone came, and certainly no one came twice until the end of the week when about 50 people showed up for a class called, "*How to Achieve a Permanent State of Orgasm*." He had the good sense to drop the rest of the curriculum. The orgasm class ran for several weeks, taught by a guy who until then had never had a date!

Flush with success, Bryan Bryan then had the notion that we should knock over an armory and sell the M16s to the Black Panthers. Swell idea, Bryan! The Black Panthers were a militant group based in Oakland

whose charter was to "Bring The Man Down." They would use any means necessary, as long as it involved violence. Bryan Bryan had heard that the ROTC at UC Santa Barbara conducted officer training with real machine guns. When they kept losing the key to the place where the guns were kept (or so the story went) they switched to a very flimsy lock that could easily be cut away in an emergency. All we had to do was slide on in with bolt cutters and grab the weapons.

I didn't want to be stuck with a pile of machine guns, so I decided that a prearranged sale would be a good idea. A few days later, I strolled into the Black Panther Headquarters. The walls were covered with posters of Eldridge Cleaver shaking his black-gloved fist in the air, and slogans proclaiming we should "Free Huey." I walked up to the man at the main desk, a small person dressed in shiny black leather, and asked him if there was anyone there who would like to buy a truckload of automatic weapons. This act of bravado isn't the single stupidest thing I have ever done, but it's easily in the top five. The man's eyes bugged out like a cartoon character when he heard my question. He proceeded to yell at me with unbrotherly hostility and started pushing me towards the door.

"Hey!" I thought. "This is the last time I try to do a favor for you, buddy." Once outside, he calmed down a little. We walked while he told me that the office was bugged and that it was not at all cool to waltz on in and say what I said. I explained that I was a right-on revolutionary white brother and just wanted to do my part. He asked where I intended to get the guns. (Was he crazy? I wasn't going to tell him!) "I have a source," I assured him. "You can count on me."

"Fine," he grunted. "Get them and then we'll talk." That sounded reasonable enough, but my experience so far was leading me to think that The Panthers and I were not destined to pal up.

I told the idiot under the basement to forget it. Only then did Bryan Bryan mention that he had heard wrong. UCSB didn't have a large room full of unprotected machine guns after all. They were parade replicas. Later, when he started to manufacture black powder bombs in his room, I had to ask him to leave. It was a practice even I thought unwise.

If you didn't live in the middle of a radical band of hippies in the '60s, revolution probably seems as remote as the American War of Independence. As school children, we were taught that if we didn't like the way things were being run in America, we had the right to make the government do things our way. Many of us students were not at all fond of the whole Vietnam thing. So we marched, howled and busted out the windows of any building with more than one branch (including, to my eternal regret, the See's Candy store). After all, didn't modern revolution-

any thought start with a bunch of longhaired liberals from wealthy families meeting secretly to plan the overthrow of King George? With a little perspective, we might have realized that although we were in the middle of a revolution in Berkeley, kids were playing hopscotch on the sidewalks two miles away. In England, they don't refer to the dust-up in 1776 as "The Revolution," but rather as "that spot of bother in the colonies."

A college kid having perspective is like a prisoner in a Siberian gulag finding ham in his soup. But if they surround your neighborhood with razor wire and gas you from attack helicopters it gives you the distinct impression that things are falling apart. We pushed. The cops pushed back. If they had ignored us, we probably would have stopped. It's sort of like your big sister calling you names; ignore her and she'll lose interest in about five minutes. But turn her car over and set it on fire and she'll beat you senseless with a lead-filled billy club and haul your bellbottom-clad ass to jail. In one roundup the cops snagged 1,850 students. They had a devil of time figuring out what to do with them afterwards.

I was walking to class one morning in the spring of 1970 and was shocked to find that the Park had been arrested. People's Park was located on a vacant block of land, which was owned by the University of California. The sheriffs ringed it with an 8-foot-high chain-link fence and, in full combat gardening attire, started yanking out the little trees. It seems that the U.C. Regents were just crazy over the notion that citizens had moved onto this lot and planted trees and gardens *without permission*. At 7 a.m., we were eating granola with yogurt. By 8 a.m., we were an angry mob, and in less than an hour, the fence was stomped flat and the cops were on the run. But not for long. They called for reinforcements, determined not to be chased around by a bunch of 'goddamn hippies,' and started to drive us from the field. They used tear gas to limited effect. Then they started to shoot. This was before the age of rubber bullets; they were using 12-gauge buckshot and were shooting to kill. My best friend, John, came into the house around noon with half his hand shot off. He had been standing right near the spot where James Rector was shot dead off a roof.



"bad apple tree"

Another student I knew lost an ear (or so he said; his hair was pretty long). Enraged, we fought back with bottles and rocks. How very like the Boston Massacre when the Red Coats opened fire on civilians in 1770!

When night fell the guys with the guns imposed a curfew, which everyone ignored. The next morning we got out of bed, and, with no clear notion of what to do next, headed back to class. I guess we were the serious students, because when the more energetic folks got out of bed, the riots began once again in earnest. I saw incredible things. I was standing on the sidewalk in front of the student union when some kid walked right into the middle of the street in front of a speeding police car carrying four sheriffs in full battle gear. He took careful aim and threw a rock right through the windshield. One of the deputies must have had his finger on a tear gas launcher, because it went off inside the car, instantly filling it with gas. I hope they had their seatbelts on.

I wrote a weekly column in the local radical newspaper, *The Berkeley Barb*. It was called, dare I say it, *Pig Stoppers Notebook*. The editor actually asked me to tone down my incendiary rhetoric by using the word "pig" less frequently. Hey, what about the First Amendment? And to think that today I'm a Junior San Mateo County Sheriff.



showtime!

These riots went on for weeks, growing larger each day. County sheriffs showed up in blue jumpsuits without badges or numbers so they couldn't be identified. Then the National Guard was called in. These were kids our age from neighboring towns and they had the good sense to stand

still while braless girls stuck flowers in their rifle barrels. The riots spread to other campuses. And it got bad. At Kent State the National Guard opened fire and killed four students. One morning, I was trying to go to class once again when I saw a guy throwing rocks, one at a time, through the library windows. Another student started to yell at him; he yelled back. People quickly took sides and in about five minutes it had developed into a full-blown riot.

My last day of class was a fittingly absurd conclusion to my official university career. I was in a class called *The Theory of Knowledge*.

It was on the ground floor of an ivy-covered hall, presided over by an ivy-covered geezer who alienated all of us in the first few minutes of class by letting his false teeth drift around in his mouth as he spoke. He was a big fan of Wolfgang Kohler. No, not the toilet manufacturer but the obscure philosopher who is only remembered because a gang of angry students stabbed him to death on the steps of the library at the University of Vienna. I was sitting in this guy's class when a riot started outside on the Chancellor's lawn. The cops were using plenty of gas and it had started to flood in through the high hopper windows. We started to choke. The professor looked around for a pole to shut the windows, but we thought it was time to go back to the streets. As we got up to leave, this gummer screamed that if we left the room we would all *fail* his class. I caught the eye of a woman named Sarah. She shrugged. I grabbed her hand and we ran outside while the professor desperately tried to hold onto his image of the world amid the gathering storm.

Outside, a group of students was chasing a single cop across the lawn. He was reaching for his gun, so Sarah and I spun round and headed towards her place. As we ran across campus, we encountered squads of police from cities all over California. This was a new tactic. On the big flagpole in the middle of campus, someone had set fire to the American flag and then hoisted it back up. One cop chased a kid under the concealing branches of a giant cypress tree, and we heard an unhealthy crack as the club came down. Then the cop walked out, holding the stub of the snapped off club. *Ouch!* His compatriots yelled at him to go back in and "get the *big piece*, you idiot!" We thought that this rookie had killed the kid, but a few seconds later, he came out rubbing his head. He hadn't even been knocked out. Sarah and I ran on, crisscrossing Telegraph Avenue to avoid the roiling clouds of gas and buckshot snicking through the trees. Eventually we arrived at Sarah's room. Take it from me; it is very hard to run full tilt while holding a woman's hand, even if she is gorgeous.

Sarah and I were pretty het-up, and we needed a diversion, and divert we did. As we busied ourselves, a squad of cops chased a kid down the block and clubbed him into insensibility right outside of Sarah's ground floor window. She had sheer drapes, and we could see the police handcuffing the kid around a tree to be retrieved later. Yikes and double yikes! I've always been grateful that I'm not easily influenced by what goes on around me, because the sheer intensity of that moment might have forever linked the act of sex with the unwholesome backdrop of a guy being clubbed and shackled. A difficult

scenario to duplicate on a day-to-day basis unless you're Idi Amin.

To support my school habit, I worked part-time as a termite man. It wasn't as glamorous as it sounds. We weren't those cowardly fools who wrap up a house and gas the little fellers. No, we went right in and smote the termites where they lived, which was generally underneath a decrepit old house. I've probably spent more time slithering around in black-widow infested crawl spaces sawing out rotten, bug-laden sub floors, than most people. This sort of work is much like being locked in a coffin all day, but with less padding.

Once freed from the cares of school, I had plenty of time to riot in the streets and battle the termites. I was on my way to work one morning when I looked up at the Berkeley Hills and saw the trees on fire. Hippies broke off rioting and joined the firemen in fighting the blaze, which eventually took out about 20 homes. I ended up chopping down the landscaping around a house with an axe. After the fire swept by and spared his house, the owner was so grateful that he wrote me a check for \$300. That night I contemplated my sudden affluence and did what anyone would do: I resigned my commission in The People's Army and chased a woman to New York.

Years later I sent for my University transcript and was shocked to discover that I didn't get an F from the Toothless Professor, but rather a D+! I had fairly earned an F and felt cheated. "Oh, where's the justice?"

And whatever happened to People's Park? Today it's a vacant lot where they sell crack.



When we weren't busy with sex, drugs and revolution, we took a few minutes to actually go to school. A recent review of the record (what records there are) reveals that I took school about as seriously as I do everything else. I called for a transcript because I wanted to see if I could track down the 'art' movie I was in.

Some people say that the best day of their lives was when they looked into the eyes of their first-born child or when their literary agent actually *called*. But if you asked me, I would have to say that late July day when hundreds of us turned up on a hillside reenacting (perhaps for the first time since 1500) Hieronymus Bosch's lurid painting *The Garden of Earthly Delights*. A porn movie has four naked people and no plot. An art movie has 250 naked people and no plot. Today people might say that it was just a sleazy way for our professor to get hundreds of his students naked and that it was just cheap porn but this guy had conned someone out of \$70,000 and that ain't exactly cheap.

I don't remember much about this particular professor's class except that it involved a lot of crawling through a vast array of connected refrigerator boxes. In fact, I remember almost nothing of what I took in college. I can't imagine how I filled the time but my course list from 1969 includes both *entomology* and *etymology*. I think I must have signed up for these two courses because of the curious fact that simply by switching a couple of letters you found yourself in entirely different worlds; entymology, the study of insects, and etymology, the study of words. The same list indicated that I took Swedish as well as "Colonial Imperialism in Africa." All of these topics still interest me. In fact, I eventually married a colonial African woman and I can still tell you that "*mitt rom är så tjusigt*" (my room is also beautiful) in Swedish.

Near the end of high school I thought that college would be just the thing, so I asked my mother what she thought. She said: go, don't go, whatever. "Whatever?" This is a woman who worked as a professor of education at the time. She was in charge of the teaching credential program at San Fernando Valley State University and she evinced no opinion on the subject of whether I should go to college or not. It didn't seem unusual to me at the time. I could have told her that I got a 12" Harley Davidson eagle tattooed across my chest and she would have said, "That's nice, dear; did it hurt?" It was my mother's philosophy to toss the kids off the dock; the ones who could swim were the keepers.

So it didn't seem unusual to find myself at Berkeley crawling through cardboard boxes for college credit. And it seemed to be in the natural course of things that I and hundreds of others should be hired for an art film. So much from that era is vague but I still recall the movie with complete clarity. Early one Saturday morning my friend Dave (the same Dave who would later disappear into a Peruvian prison), Cindy and I drove to some obscure town called Portola Valley. A freeway called 280 had just opened, and it was so new and unblemished that it still smelled like concrete. We got lost looking for the shoot and ended up on Old La Honda Road.

Old La Honda Road

This road was first cut in 1847, and I now drive it every day. There are faster roads, but I like this one because it is somewhat compromised in terms of the width and straightness and therefore rather dangerous. Even today, you have to wait on either side of several redwood trees where it narrows down to one lane. John Steinbeck used to take this road to go camping on the coast during his brief stint at Stanford and Ken Kesey used to go the other way to buy jug wine in Palo Alto. There was an old roadhouse about two miles up from the bottom called The Upenuf Tavern, so named

because it was where you'd rest tired horses who, at that point, had gone "up enough." But by far the most interesting thing to happen on the road was when Walt Disney came to film a scene from the 1960 movie *Darby O'Gill and The Little People*. They built a set under the bridge and it can still be seen today. It was Sean Connery's first big scene in a movie.



Like Sean, we were lured to the area by a movie. Jelich Ranch, which was and remains a back road apple farm, was swarming with hippies. They had a caterer, a helicopter, three camera crews and a half-dozen people with bullhorns who herded us up into a meadow. Filmmaking, even art filmmaking, involves a good deal of standing around and this film was no exception.

The professor/director fancied himself as something of a cross between Cecil B. and Fellini, and we were all there to be part of 'the big scene.' This involved us getting naked and sort of ad libbing what this many naked hippies would do if given \$10, lunch and artistic license. If you have a good look at Bosch's painting most of what is taking place is eating and dismemberment but we were supposed to concentrate more on love. I can still hear the professor/director yelling through his bullhorn that we should "laaaaaave one another." Love: always a good idea, naked or not.

Unfortunately, not everyone was having fun. There was a casting call for *meatballs* and several volunteered, having no idea that they would be driven to the top of the mountain, outfitted in spherical fur meatball costumes and forced to watch the rest of us far below as we writhed in youthful ecstasy. Later, many of the cast got severe sunburns and some had to be hospitalized with near terminal poison oak. Several of the meatballs passed out from sunstroke.

As for plot: plot schmot!

Driving home, Dave and I agreed that if all of life was going to be this much fun it would be just fine with us.

"Hey, Dave, do you know what Hieronymus Bosch's real first name was?"

"No."

"It was Jerry. Jerry Bosch. He changed it when he started to get famous."

"Makes sense," said Dave. We rode for a while in companionable silence. Then Dave asked, "Where's Cindy?"

"Damn!" I slapped my forehead. "We forgot Cindy!"

Cindy was all right. She had hooked up with some fellow and they hitchhiked to Mexico. We didn't see her for weeks but she returned just

in time for the premiere of *Roseland* (not the famous movie *Roseland*, the forgotten movie *Roseland*), which was held at a big theater in San Francisco. More people were in the movie than at the opening and it sank without a ripple.



Chapter 8.

YOU WANT SEE SFINKI?

One day I read that Colonel Muammer Quadafi was building an atom bomb-proof chemical warfare plant deep inside a mountain somewhere in Libya. Having lived in Libya when I was nine (although in truth I don't recall having left the military base), I naturally assumed that I would be enthusiastically welcomed back. When I first left Libya, it was a very poor country but since then it had become the wealthiest country in Africa. Libya is basically a sand trap floating on top of a big pond of high-grade Texas Tea. In the early '90s the World Court resolved that, because the Libyan government was responsible for a good deal of international terrorism, specifically the Lockerbie airline bombing, no country would allow airplanes to land if they were going in or out of Libya. This was an unprecedented move. The blockade definitely put a crimp in Libya's fun factor, not that they had really been known as party folks to start with. We knew about the chemical plant because we had tracked West German drilling equipment through several countries and determined that it was destined for Libya. The U.S. State Department was trying to interdict the drilling equipment to slow this looming nightmare. Now I have always had the notion that if you expose your enemies to the glories of Western freedom with our wretched excesses of unfettered consumerism it will have an undeniable appeal. If the troublemakers don't shape up we can threaten to withhold reruns of *Friends* and pinch the Coca Cola pipe shut. This has already worked in Japan, Germany and Russia.

A Crib Course in Libyan History

suitable for pocket or purse!

Libya might very well be the seat of an ancient empire, but the country is not as old as I am. Muammer, ("call me Mo") is only Libya's second leader, but over the years there have been even more flags stuck in the sand over there than at Crazy Bobz Used Cars in Bakersfield. The Berbers had the original lease, but eventually they were pushed into the desert by the Egyptians. Hot on their heels came the Phoenicians, Greeks, Carthaginians, and Romans. The Carthaginians were led at one point by that perennial puppy-in-the-punchbowl, Hannibal, who went over the Alps with his elephants, and surprised the Romans. It was like finding the Ringling Brothers set up in your back yard and all the circus performers trying to kill you. Hannibal and the Romans went at it on and off for 30 years until Hannibal was finally cornered in what is now Turkey. The Romans *a/ways* wanted things their way so they took the Carthaginians

to the woodshed *three times*. The Romans pushed the rumor that they sowed the fields of the Carthaginians with salt to keep the locals from planting crops. (Be skeptical here. Salt was so valuable it was used as money at that time.) Well, whatever happened everyone got mad again and a fourth Punic War started. Why all this hassle over a bunch of sand? Who knows, but for some unaccountable reason the Romans wanted the place, and later so did the Byzants, Turks, Spanish, Maltese, Italians, British, French, Italians and finally the Arabs. If I've left any of you out, please see me after class. Even the U.S. had a base there in the '50s and that's where I developed a fondness for camels and a great aversion to figs, when my sister told me that figs came from goats.

When oil was discovered in 1959, Mo showed the recently crowned king the door and then awarded himself a titload of medals as a thank-you gift. This man has a limited understanding of military rank. Most tinpot dictators prefer the title Grand Vizier, Generalissimo or President For Life. Mo picked the rank of Colonel. When he is eventually locked up on Devil's Island, his rank is so *de minimus* that he will barely get to sit with the grownups. On the plus side, he wears beautiful uniforms (though I think the epaulettes overlarge) made at the same factory in Seville, Spain where I get mine.

I had the notion that my son Dylan and I would drop in on The Little Colonel and ask him to put a sock in the international terrorism thing, bring him some Yanni CDs and get him a subscription to Ben and Jerry's Chunky Monkey. It just might depressurize this unhappy lad a tad and we would all be better off as a result. So Dylan and I started out for Tripoli in 1998. I figured that if I couldn't reason with Mo then I would toss him the kid and make a run for the border. Dylan was 19 and traveling somewhere in the Czech Republic or Slovakia (or maybe Slovenia) and I had agreed to meet him in Milano (named for the Pepperidge Farm cookie of that name, I believe). We planned to take the train to Sicily, a ferry to Tunisia and grab a cab to Tripoli, then make our way by bus to Cairo, shoot down the Nile to Alexandria, ferry to Athens, train to Patris, ferry to Bari, and hop a freight back to Milan. We figured the trip should take about a week.

Spelling Options

- A. (1) Muammar Qaddafi, (2) Mo'ammar Gadhafi, (3) Muammar Kaddafi, (4) Muammar Qadhafi, (5) Moammar El Kadhafi, (6) Muammar Gadafi, (7) Mu'ammar al-Qadafi, (8) Moamer El Kazzafi, (9) Moamar al-Gaddafi, (10) Mu'ammar Al Qathafi, (11) Muammar Al Qathafi, (12) Mo'ammar el-Gadhafi, (13) Moamar El Kadhafi, (14) Muammar al-Qadhafi, (15) Mu'ammar al-Qadhdhafi, (16) Mu'ammar Qadafi, (17) Moamar Gaddafi, (18) Mu'ammar Qadhdhafi, (19) Muammar Khaddafi, (20) Muammar al-Khaddafi, (21) Mu'amar al-Kadafi, (22) Muammar Ghaddafi, (23) Muammar Ghadafi, (24) Muammar

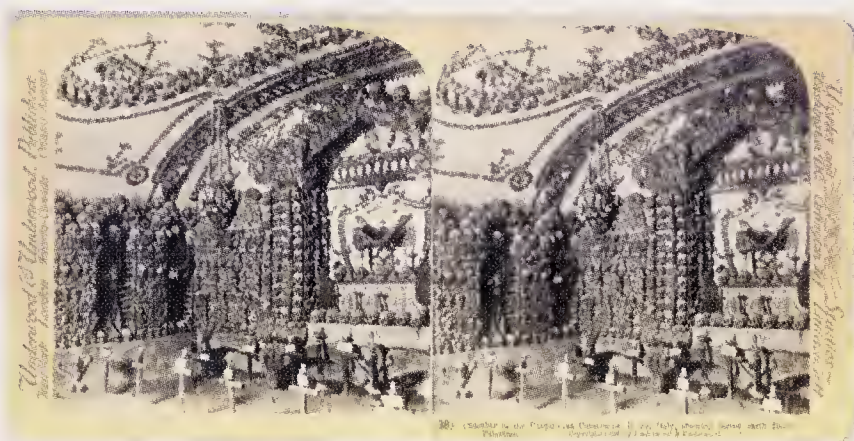
Ghaddafi, (25) Muamar Kaddafi, (26) Muammar Quathafi, (27) Muamar Gheddafi, (28) Muamar Al-Kaddafi, (29) Moammar Khadafy, (30) Moammar Qudhafi, (31) Mu'ammarr al-Qaddafi, (32) Mulazim Awwal Mu'ammarr Muhammad Abu Minyar al-Qadhafi.

B. A boy named Mo

I hated to miss Rome as we passed by because I always like to stop at the Capuchin monastery. The Romans won't tell you where it is, but I will. I was haunted as a child by a stereopticon card of some mysterious Ossuary (bone collection) somewhere in Rome and I finally tracked it down.

This place is at the corner of Via Cavour and Via Veneto in one of the most fashionable neighborhoods in Rome. It has room after room of the "thigh bone connected leg bone, oh hear the praise of the Lord."

We've all seen the odd skeleton or two and even some really nifty mummies, but here, the monks have assembled tables, chairs, altars and chandeliers out of human bones. Children have been nailed, skin on, to the walls. The Capuchins are Franciscan monks and the



"what's that smell?"

Romans would love it if they would move to the burbs. Not likely. They have been there for 400 years. They charge about a buck to go through the place, and it is generally not very well attended because it is a solid 10 on the gruesome scale. It's right up there with Peter The Great's two-headed baby collection in St. Petersburg. I was in a restaurant right next door and the waiter denied having ever heard of it. Mr. Sensitive!

Dylan is great with train schedules and we were soon speeding past all the rest of the famous places in Italy. We didn't even get off the train to cross the Straits of Messina, which separates the mainland from Sicily. They simply uncoupled the train cars and put them on a ship. Since we were so close to Mt. Etna we decided to take a run up there and see what all the smoke was about. We heard that glowing chunks the size of '56 Pontiacs were falling regularly in the parking lot and we thought that watching villages being consumed by lava would be a nice break from the monotony of train travel. In Reposto we finally found the Etna bus on an exceedingly hot day in July and climbed aboard for the trip to the top of the volcano. The bus was a sporty unit built around World War I very like the one Mussolini rode on as a boy. I was dubious as to whether this old banger could make the 10,000-foot climb to the top. We waited on the dormant bus for what felt like an eternity. We

were soon delirious from the heat, sizzling like the ants we used to fry under a magnifying glass as kids. Dylan looked at me with unfocused eyes, "Dad," he slurred, "My sunglasses are melting." If it had been any hotter they could have stuck cloves in rows in our backs like Christmas hams. Passengers kept giving up and getting off only to have new ones take their places. Finally the driver appeared and asked the passengers if this was the bus for Mt. Etna. "*Si, si!*" Those of us who were not in a coma screamed, nearly in tears.

"*Non c'è oggi il bus per Etna*" (no bus for Etna today) he said, and with that we all stumbled off. We could see the bus from the train as we pulled out; it was starting to fill up again.

Avvertire questo è realmente realmente pericolosa!

(WARNING, THIS IS REALLY REALLY DANGEROUS!)

Dylan and I had been to Italy a couple of times before and I cringe whenever I think of the Leaning Tower of Pisa. It is the only place in Italy where I ever saw a warning sign. Generally if a kid falls off a building in Italy they expect the parents to clean up the sidewalk. Dylan was 10 at the time we climbed the tower. There were signs in about 12 languages warning that the tower was really, really dangerous. Being Americans we're used to ignoring the millions of warning signs we see all over the U.S. Take it from me, climbing the Leaning Tower of Pisa (which is even more out of plumb than it looks from the ground) on wet marble steps greased with the morning dew and polished by the sneakers of 500 years worth of schoolchildren is like climbing the glacier on K2 in nylon socks.

The tower is 180 feet tall and has a nice solid concrete patio at its base. At each level you have the opportunity to walk out to the edge to admire the view. Near the top, Dylan and I sauntered out, on the low side, to survey the town. I heard him say "Dad?" and I looked over in time to see him sliding toward the edge. There's never been a guardrail or anything else for a little kid to hold on to. I grabbed him by the collar just as he was about to go over. A dramatic fall would have made a much better story but would have been so hard to explain to his mother.

Later I found out that people fall off with such regularity that the locals refer to the splat as 'tourist pizza.'

We knew that the train to Palermo would take us along the mercifully cooling seacoast. We had been dying to go in the water ever since Milan. And we had *seen* a good deal of water but we hadn't actually gotten a chance to go in it. We fell asleep on the train and when we woke up we marveled at the desert-like countryside. Where was the sea, I wondered? It seems that while we were sleeping, they had taken

the train apart again and our few cars were headed south, as far from Palermo as possible. OK, OK, at least we can go to the beach.

Sunday on a Sicilian beach is a shocking affair. On the beach at Agrigento we came across a man lying in the sun who appeared to have been boiled. His skin was the color of a splitingly ripe tomato and we were shocked to see no one attending to the dead man. But then he raised his head and said, "*Buon Giorno!*" He was near a pile of equally incinerated comrades and then we saw that all up and down the beach there were people with flesh so utterly roasted that we figured there must be something weird about the sun in Sicily, so we high-tailed it off the beach before the Capuchins came after us.

When most people think of Italy they think of food. I never do. There are only about three chefs left in all of Sicily because the rest have moved to New York. We nearly starved to death there. There is no shortage of people, though, and they fill the streets to bursting. There are countless bars selling cookies and 100-proof grappa. We survived principally on popsicles, and this after two days of train food. In Italy they have these elaborate upright glass cases with all kinds of fascinating ice cream concoctions, but if you reach for one an old woman leaps from behind the counter and screams, "NO, NO!" They *really* don't like you touching their stuff even if it's paid for. They insist on picking it up and handing it to you. No doubt this attitude comes from all the unpleasant conquests endemic to this region. Generally, if someone reaches for your stuff in these parts, they have no intention of paying. They just grab it, burn your town, and rename the place after themselves.

At dusk, we hopped the ferry to Tunis at the southern most Italian port of Trapani. It was an overnighter and it was filled with Tunisian laborers returning home for the weekend. We were certainly the only Americans on board and Dylan and I shared an intimate metal box equipped with four miniature beds and a couple of Carthaginians who tried to speak to us in Arabic. We didn't know any Arabic except for "hut hut hut" (which is what you say to a camel to make it run). I was saving this to use on Mo. We communicated by speaking very loudly in Spanish since that was the only foreign language we knew and they spoke to us very slowly back in Arabic mixed with a little Tunisian street French.

Around midnight, we heard screaming from the grand salon so the four of us traipsed upstairs to see what was going on. The grand salon was littered with several hundred orange plastic chairs, all filled with men laughing at some huge joke. They were watching a movie on a TV set. It was *Ishtar*, a Hollywood flop of epic proportions. I had never seen it before but it appeared to involve Dustin Hoffman and Warren Beatty

dressed as Arabs and struggling through the Sahara, dragging a reluctant camel. The movie was dubbed in French and subtitled in Arabic. Whatever the actors were saying seemed to completely thrill the audience, eliciting torrents of laughter and a barrage of orange peels and grapes. Because laughing isn't really allowed in Tunisia they were getting their yucks out while they could. Dylan pointed out that some of the guys were mouthing the words. It was sort of a Tunisian *Rocky Horror Picture Show*. When they saw us, though, all the laughter stopped. You could have heard a grape drop. Then Dylan pointed at the screen and started to laugh. Soon the place was rollicking again and they offered us dried apricots, pistachios, and chairs, right up front.

All the fun stopped at the border. I doubt that Tunisia is the only country where they don't laugh but it's the only one I've ever been to. Even in Russia people laugh, though it is generally because of that "fitha vaka we hafer lunsh." We disembarked, waved goodbye to our now sullen friends and walked across a rubble-strewn field toward the capital. We expected a major city but what we found was a dusty little one-camel town with a main street about ten blocks long.

Dylan eyed me with that knowing glance of his indicating that I have no idea what I'm doing. "Hey, ya little bum, I saved you from falling off The Leaning Tower!"

We met a man we presumed to be the mayor and he beckoned us to sit with him on a pile of dust. He introduced himself as Ali, and amazingly, he spoke English.

"We expected this town to be a little larger," I said a little dolefully, "it being such an important city and all."

"It will be larger one day, God willing," he answered.

"I have no doubt," I said. "Might you direct us to the Libyan border, God willing, *por favor*?"

"Yes, it is that way," and he pointed out across the water. I knew it was across the gulf but we needed the actual road.

"Can you direct us to the Libyan Embassy?" I queried.

"That would be in Tunis, I would imagine," he said.

"Dad, I don't think this is Tunis," said Dylan.

"Shush, Dylan, this is Tunis, son. It says so on the map."

The mayor pointed into the distance where we saw a huge dust cloud.



into africa

“The boy is correct. Go that way,” he said in a deep, prophetic voice. “There you will find what you are looking for.” He was wrong about us finding what we were looking for, but he was right about it being Tunis.

At first glance, Tunis looks pretty lively until we realized that one guy was making all the noise. His name was Ali, too (it turns out most Tunisians are named Ali) and he glommed onto us immediately, announcing that he was our new best friend. I like to make friends wherever I go even if the friendship is sometimes based on something other than friendship, such as, say, money. Ali knew his way around and he was more than happy to show us what was what in Tunisland. We were nearly comatose with the heat so we asked him to take us to the beach. We jumped in a cab and took off to ancient Carthage a few miles away. We ended up on a fabulous beach where there was a big sign that read “Danger du Mort.” The word “Mort” did not sound good. We saw a large sewer pipe working double-time right at the water’s edge. A few fish serenely floated upside down near the shore. No swimming today, I thought.



toiletfish bay

Ali then took us to the Kasbah where we found a broad selection of Western-style wedding gowns, figs, hardtack and bundles of sagebrush. Ali promised to show us what had once been the Great Caliph’s Palace. It seems that it was now a carpet mill. We explained to Ali that we were traveling with a couple of carry-ons and didn’t intend to lug around a 200-lb carpet. “No problem, we just say hello to my friend.” The palace consisted of a decrepit warehouse crammed to the gills with carpets. We met the owner, improbably named Phil rather than Ali, who showed us the Great Caliph’s bed. This was a big highlight of the tour, as it was a good ten feet wide. Phil told us that now it might be piled high with carpets but in days of old The Great Caliph slept in this great bed with four of his wives. It’s too bad he was such a poor caliph because the bed was little more than brightly painted 2X4’s with broken pieces of mirror and tile shards glued to it. On our way upstairs we passed two women sitting in front of a small loom with a carpet suspended in mid-warp. They were chatting dully and picking at a plate of dates. In the Great Caliph’s Grand Ballroom we were offered tea and hardtack while carpets of every imaginable sort were rolled out for our inspection. It was reminiscent of a New Hampshire fruit stand selling coconuts. I’m sure I saw some rugs from India.

Years ago I inherited dozens of carpets of all kinds from both sides

of my family. In our house they are primarily used as the final resting place for regurgitated mice, headless voles and half-plucked birds put on proud display by the parade of cats we have had over the years. I explained to Phil that:

1. I had never bought a carpet.
2. I would not be buying one today.
3. I was entirely positive that I would never, ever buy a carpet in the future.
4. Never. Not even one.

"No problem," said Phil. "I will sell you this one for \$3,000." I could tell you that it was a crummy carpet but as I know a little about this subject I saw that it was actually a decent piece. No matter what I said, he insisted that I would be buying a carpet. Phil grew perplexed as I continued to resist.

Phil looked at me with a puzzled expression, "Have we not drunk tea together? Are we not friends?" He assured me of the excellent quality. He took credit cards. I could come by and drink tea for life. He couldn't figure out where the log jam was. Phil kept dropping the price until he had hit his rock bottom at \$800, rattling his teacup for emphasis. All through the price cuts I had failed to counter because I sincerely didn't want a carpet. In desperation, he asked what I would pay. I guess I had grown a little fond of Phil. After all, we had shared tea together at the Palace so I decided to be merciful and bring the negotiations to a close. "\$100," I said. He looked as if I had kicked the skulls of his ancestors off the porch. He hung his head in despair and sighed deeply. "Very well," he said, "you win. \$100 and I will ship."

I said I would think about it because it was a big decision. At this Phil sprung up and stomped down the stairs in a huff and we were left with our empty cups and the grieving Ali. On our way out we saw the two women still picking at the dates, the carpet frozen in its dusty loom. We were supposed to believe that the two of them could have produced the several square miles of carpet on that *rickety* little device?

We passed Phil on our way out. He had already forgotten us and was regaling a giggling Japanese woman in a Spiderman T-shirt with tales of the Great Caliph and his four wives.

Next, we went to a drum factory, where they were pretending to craft every sort of ceramic drum, complete with goatskin tops. Dylan bought a 'professional model,' "only available to insiders." Ali tried to drag us to a perfume factory and a glass blowing factory "all wholesale, only available to insiders" but we begged off with \$20 and he went away happy. Later we missed him because he was the only cheerful person we met in Tunisia.

The word about our not buying the carpet must have spread. We checked into a hotel and they squinted at us like we were drowning kittens at a church social. We greeted the clerks when we passed through the lobby and out but they just glared at us. No matter, our goal was the fun-filled beaches of Libya and we went into one travel agency after another but no one seemed to have excursions to Libya. Tunisia is bordered on the west by Algeria, which is a place so hostile to outsiders that our guidebook had only one simple sentence: “We have no current information on Algeria at all (*‘Danger du Mort’*).” Eventually we found a dusty brochure, in Italian, presumably extolling the glories of Libya with pictures of the magnificent Roman ruins. The ruins were just that, ruins. Those you see in Italy and Greece might look pretty banged up but you should have seen them before they’d been reassembled. The ruins in Libya are in their natural state, that being a jumble of rubble poking through the sand. But, *aha!* the address of the local Libyan embassy was on the brochure so we tootled on over and went up to the front desk. “We wish to go to Libya,” I declared. The man behind the desk glared at me with a look generally reserved for someone who has just spit in your face. “Show me your invitation,” he seethed.

I slapped at my pockets and said, “Ah...well...we don’t exactly have an invitation. We are tourists, you see, and we just want to go see the sights.” I showed him the brochure. He furrowed his brow suspiciously and told us to wait and he disappeared into a back room. The only other people there were three Germans. I took them for mining engineers. One of them asked, “Why do you want to go to Libya?” I told him that we wanted to go visit the Colonel.

He grabbed me by the arm and said earnestly, “I don’t know why you want to do that but take my advice. Don’t go. It is a wery, wery, wery bad idea. We have to go but you don’t, so go anywhere else but do...not...go there. You will not find the same friendly people you find here in Tunis.”

Just then, the desk man came back. He said, “No invitation, no entry, go away. Do not come back.”

Dylan looked at me pleadingly. This was one of those watershed moments where you make a stand for world peace in spite of the odds or simply give up and fly somewhere where you will be appreciated. That evening we pulled into Giza. The Pyramids loomed in the distance. The cab driver ground his gears slowly through the impossible traffic, and at an intersection a man put his head into the window and grinned toothlessly. “You want see Sfinki?” he asked.

We did want see Sfinki.



Whereas we found Tunisians a dull lot, with a lofty French attitude and no good reason for it, the Egyptians we met were an openhearted, cheerful people. They like to laugh, talk loud, and occasionally gun down a few tourists. We felt right at home. Traffic maneuvers in this city of 10 million are executed with the passion of the Crusades. Even though the traffic lights generally work, they are completely disregarded. Semi trucks compete for position with horse carts heaped with impossibly high loads of tomatoes driven by ten-year-olds and women teeter on a wished-for dotted line with multiple bundles and wide-eyed children. The trick is never to stop for anybody. It would be romantic to think that it all functioned like some magical third world clockwork, but a lot of people get run over, there are frequent smashups and a good number of folks are missing a leg or two. All the drivers are men. When a boy is born in Egypt he's given a pack of cigarettes and then he immediately starts pounding on the horn and doesn't stop until the car blows up or he crashes. Magdi, our driver, said they have an expression, "We don't drive, we fight." At one point we found ourselves rattling along in Magdi's ancient Peugeot at 70 mph on a freeway. The moon was out. Good thing. The glowing tip of a cigarette drifted by in the adjacent lane and I thought drowsily that the car along side of us on the freeway didn't have any headlights either. His alternator was probably blown too, or he believed, as so many Egyptian drivers do, that driving without headlights somehow saves energy.

In Giza we found a hotel that seemed eerily empty. It was the four-star Europa (four stars means elevator, five stars means working elevator). We had heard that 18 tourists had been gunned down in Egypt a week before our visit and we asked Magdi where it had been. "Right here," he said. I said I knew it had been in Giza, but where specifically?

"Right here, where you are standing" he said a little sheepishly. "And it wasn't 18, it was 21." We looked at the bullet strikes on the marble floor. They had replaced the glass but had a harder time removing the bloodstains in the grout lines.

We explained to Magdi that we were saddened that we were not able to get into Libya but if we could climb the Great Pyramid we would feel a lot better. Climbing the pyramids is no longer allowed and it's really not possible to go up without sticking out like a hay bale in a hot tub. Magdi suggested that baksheesh in the right hand (sometimes called palm oil) would smooth our ascent. He took us to meet Shassie, a camel driver, who rented these spunkless beasts to one and all at a starting price of \$200 an hour and a final price of about five bucks for as long as you

want. We rode a threadbare old camel and a desiccated little horse toward the Great Pyramid and cased the joint for a route to the top. We made vague arrangements with Shassie to come back and climb at night with one of his boys, but in the end we decided that he had an insufficient number of teeth to make a reliable deal. Plus, his head boy actually tried to pull off one of the oldest tricks in this land of very old tricks: namely that of taking us away from the pyramids and charging extra to bring us back as if we might not notice we were going the wrong direction.

Later Magdi took us to meet Hamid, aka 'The Man of the Pyramids' who received us in rooftop splendor at his modern home right in front of the Sphinx. We sat in the early evening drinking mango juice and getting to know each other. After an hour or so discussing the weather (which is either hot or very hot) we finally got to the subject of the climb. Hamid explained that his father and grandfather before him had been pyramid guides. For the last 20 years or so the pyramids have been closed to climbers because too many tourists slipped. Their heads go off when they land, very much like watermelons dropped from the Eiffel Tower.

We arranged to come back at 4:00 a.m. and be on top for the sunrise. As we concluded the arrangements and were leaving, Hamid said we should stay for the light show. Light show, I thought, how interesting could that be. Picture three pyramids over a mile wide. All of a sudden, they start to glow from behind and a huge voice booms forth, "5000 years ago this was the glory of Egypt. How many lives did it take to build these monuments to the afterlife?" Then the faces of the pyramids begin to glow a deep red, dramatic music flares and on come the disco lasers outlining the pyramids in every imaginable color, even projecting an image of the U.S. Capitol building onto the Great Pyramid.

Desperate for a bit of shut-eye we went back to our hotel, now the venerable Mina House, the grandest (and at 140 years one of the oldest) hotels in Cairo. This place is so big that they actually lost our luggage. That night I plowed into the buffet while Dylan ordered from Pizza Hut. The buffet could easily have handled 200 people but I was the only one there.

We met Hamid at his house a few hours later and silently strolled through the back streets of Giza. We crept over rooftops and slipped over the main wall surrounding the pyramids. The first guard had the requisite automatic weapon with a bayonet sporting a gleaming, razor-sharp edge. Now I understood that he might want to shoot and then stab trespassers, but did he also want to cut our throats? Hamid led the way smoothly and on we moved, through a regiment of guards, guard supervisors and assorted hangers-on, all palms up as if checking for rain.

Soon we came to the base of the great Pyramid of Cheops, at 528 feet tall the largest of 130 pyramids in Egypt. The first 100 feet is built of rocks almost 4 feet high but soon the stones become smaller and easier to climb. Near the top we heard voices and Hamid said they were probably Japanese. Indeed several Japanese students were at the top; the word is out in Tokyo. Since Hamid felt that the pyramids belonged to his family he told these kids that they would be in a heap of hurt if they were spotted by the guards in the daylight, but he, The Man of the Pyramids, would save them. Now Hamid had misheard my name as Venus and he combined this with my geographical reference to Stanford to dub me Professor Venus from Stanford. He mugged that the group were my students. I told you Egyptians are fun!

As the sun leaked through the grimy air, Cairo woke up and we started down. 'The Man of the Pyramids' escorted my students to their appointment with destiny as Dylan and I went into Giza to watch Arab Africa lurch to its feet—or in some cases, foot.

After wearing out our welcome and the merchants (don't ask me about the incident in the Great Mosque) we decided to take the ferry from Alexandria to the Aegean. We bid the ancient city a misty-eyed farewell and saw the tips of the pyramids disappear over the hill for perhaps the last time in our lives. Magdi drove us the five hours to what was once the greatest seaport in the world. Well, that was a long time ago and it turned out that they had dropped all ferry service and in fact, shipping had dried up there entirely. There wasn't as much as a rowboat in the harbor. This meant that we had to take the cab back to Cairo where in a few hours we said a misty-eyed hello to the place rather sooner than we had expected. We checked back into our hotel (this time we carried our bags to the room) and the next day made our way to the airport for a flight to Athens.



"make a wish"

Chapter 9.

NEW YORK CITY, DYNAMITE IN THE WRONG HANDS

I was driving across the Rockies when it started to rain. A black rain cloud had gathered over my head and followed me night and day, like some devoted maniac, all across the Midwest. The rain fell in Pennsylvania with such terrific Old Testament ferocity that I was practically dog-paddling by the time I got to New Jersey. I had just come from California where we see summer rain about as often as we see the Pope. Finally Manhattan rose into view, but suddenly I was unceremoniously flushed into the Lincoln Tunnel and bobbed out on the other side, like a cat through a carwash, dripping and confused into New-York-City.

I pulled over for what seemed like the first time in three days and stepped out of my truck. I looked around and breathed in the air. It was just past 9 a.m. on a Sunday in July and it was already 80 degrees. The sun broke through the clouds and a steamy salmagundi of garbage, sewage and corruption wafted up from the very pavement. A few feet away I saw an immense world-weary rat, lounging by his storm drain brandishing what looked like a tiny switchblade. I wiped at the sweat on my neck and got back in my truck.

In California, car horns are generally the signal that something dire is imminent. They are cautionary devices. In New York City, horns are motivational devices and are employed like electric cattle prods. In New York City you can get honked at if you don't start across an intersection *before* the light turns green.

I was so exhausted and dazed from lack of sleep that I drove through a scene that seemed half real and half dream. In New York, people will actually scream at you if you have the bad taste to drive too fast between sides of beef hanging from racks that they are pushing right out on the open streets. I failed to notice the barricades and power cables and came to a stop in the middle of a mob of men with tough looking pushed-in faces and blood-smeared aprons. A man ran up to me, holding a clipboard. I leaned out the window and was about to ask him what the holdup was when he yelled that the director would be over in about 10 seconds to beat the ever-living crap out of me. He waved his

clipboard around in exasperation and asked me if I couldn't tell that they were shooting a movie. I had driven onto the set, ruining the take. I jammed the truck in reverse and shot backwards as they all glared at me. I had thought it odd that there were so many people working on a Sunday.

I inspected my map and pinpointed Bleeker and MacDougal in Greenwich Village and somehow found a parking place. I had followed a woman named Joan to NYC and was nearly there. I had bought some flowers the day before but they were now little more like a sad wad of weeds and I gave them a toss. I washed myself with a bottle of water and combed my insubordinate swarm of shoulder length hair. I was right next to a phone booth and thought I would give Joan a 60-second warning so I stepped to the phone and was just about to pick it up when it rang. I picked it up and a male voice asked, "Do you want a blow job?"

"Say again?"

"Do you want a blow job?" He could have been asking, "Do you want a cup of coffee?" or "Do you have the time?" I had trouble registering the words in my tired state but suddenly the meaning shot through me like a toddler chewing through a lamp cord. I dropped the handset and leapt back from the phone. I looked at the tall buildings around me and realized that someone was watching me from one of the anonymous windows. I beat it around the corner. I found Joan's address and reached over a bum collapsed in the hallway to push the buzzer. Buzzzzzz, I was in! I bounded the stairs two at a time and breathlessly recounted that I had been in NYC for less than fifteen minutes and had driven through a movie set, narrowly escaping a beating; had been propositioned; and had seen a rat the size of a beaver.

Joan laughed. She had on a thin dress. "Oh, really?" she said. "Well how about this," and she reached behind her head and grabbed the neck of her dress, and in one fluid motion flung it over her head and tossed it aside. "Give me your poor, your tired, your yearning..."

I smiled. "I'm gonna love this town."

After a couple of weeks, I had to face the fact that I had no money, and at the age of 21, I hadn't the slightest notion what I might be good at. I thought that perhaps I should go to an employment agency and see what was available. The agency I went to handled construction day labor and since I knew which end of a shovel to lean on, I lined up with a group of



joan

rough looking characters standing around in front of a grubby hiring office. I pasted on my glummost, city weary expression. One of the guys in line snarled at me, “What are you smiling about?”

I felt like there was hay sticking out of my hair but I was big and strong, so I was one of several picked to go uptown to a demolition job to tear out plumbing fixtures and electrical panels from a decayed building. OK. Later I discovered that buildings *fall* down on their own all the time in the city. I once saw a parking garage that had thrown in the towel just a few minutes before I got there. All the cars spilled out like toys into the street below. To out-of-towners these occasional collapses seem exotic and dangerous, but to New Yorkers it’s just another form of entertainment. A couple of weeks later, I joined Center Demolition. Center was owned by two young guys not much older than me and we hit it off right away. In a few days I was made foreman.



free car wash with parking today

Low-rise demolition is just common sense. You need a grasp of moving through time and space. You have to pick the right tools and be able to size up the capabilities of a collection of derelicts (some in severe need of a remodel themselves) who will do the majority of the work. I was in charge of a group of four or five men and led with a 30-pound wrecking bar, stripping some of the problematic parts such as large sheets of glass and the bits that would be salvaged. Steel-toed shoes, hard hats and asbestos masks were for wimps. We were manly men. This sort of work is very good for the soul if a little risky to the body. If you show talent you might eventually move up to running the ball. This is a very good job. It pays a lot and is a much-coveted position. I never got a chance to run the ball but they say that there are few experiences more fun than smacking a one-ton ball into a masonry building. I wish I had, but my demo career caromed in a different direction.

I worked for Miles and Mike. Miles was from Queens, half-Jewish and half-Italian, and Mike was from New Jersey, or more correctly, “Joysee,” and was Italian twice over. This distinction in breeding is important in New York, especially in construction. With management

that was seventy-five percent Italian we were able to stay out of trouble with the many agencies that could have made our lives not worth living.

We ripped out the scruffy interiors of old buildings so decrepit that even the cockroaches had packed their Vuitton luggage and found better accommodations. One time we took out the ancient cabinets of a Chinese herbalist's shop. The cases had hundreds of drawers containing roots, powders, seeds, dried songbirds and strange gallbladdery looking things preserved in jars. I tried to figure out what some of these potions could have been used for, but the cabinets held onto their secrets.

Once, one of the men tossed some old 35mm movie film cans into a debris box before I was able to stop him. I wanted to see if there was some lost gem of the silent era. It was lucky that I didn't catch him in time because the old nitrate stock exploded into flames when the cans broke open. Mostly though, our work was more prosaic and we tossed out stacks of National Geographics (I have come to believe that back issues of this magazine constitute most of the missing matter from the Big Bang) and all manner of dried cats, their faces set in hellish snarls.

Center Demo was non-union and non-licensed. We worked strictly for cash—which meant we employed crews of drug addicts, drunks and men on the lam. We were an outlaw operation with no office, books or business cards. Just a few weeks before, in Berkeley, I had my teeth set on revolution, but now I settled for knocking stuff down. I had read a good deal of Jack London. This was my time to “back life into a corner” and smack it around with a sledgehammer. At Berkeley I saw myself as quite the intellectual. Now my main concern was to avoid falling through a rotted floor. I threw myself at the work with enthusiasm and in a couple of months Miles and Mike made me a partner. After expenses, we would split the take three ways. Insurance, taxes and the like were inconveniences we thought best left to others.

Because we were cheap and fast we had more work than we could handle and I was charged with rounding up ever more bodies to replace those who had run off because the work was too hard or dropped out to chase down their next fix. Mondays we hoped to muster as many as ten men but we nearly always came up short so I drove to 125th Street and beyond, in Harlem, with a colossal black man named Alfonso Quynne combing the streets for talent. Alfonso was from Kingston, Jamaica and he was a sweet, genial giant several inches taller than my 6'5". We called him the Mighty Quynne (pronounced Quinn) and I told him that he had arms like the proverbial oak. He corrected me and said, “Mo like the pro-verbial ebony, mon.” True. He was essentially my body-guard, interpreter and mentor on these expeditions because we were in a part of New York that was as different from Greenwich Village as Brus-

sels is from Brazzaville, although at 9 a.m. on a Monday all the truly dangerous people were still passed out or stabbed. We had a number of labor sources and I felt like a Barbary Coast sea captain shanghaiing a crew.

Our first stop was Friday's, an all-night diner near 129th and Columbus. The woman who owned the place put the word out on the weekend that we would be by looking for day workers. We paid a \$10 bounty if they stayed a full day. Black, White, Puerto Rican, no matter. I learned to take the measure of a man for a day's work. When I shook their hands, I felt for a workingman's calluses in their grip. These were men down on, or entirely out of luck and they lived a shadow existence of the streets, shelters, day labor and crime.

The work was hard and if you were injured you were on your own, but we paid \$4.00 an hour at a time when the minimum wage was \$1.65. There was no stability with Central Demo but for those who didn't have the talent for crime, we were one of the few ways to get a little money. Begging on street corners had yet to become trendy. I look at the bums today who wear the mantle of *homeless* and see very few who would be able to handle the work we dished out, despite the heartfelt pledges on their cardboard signs that they will work for food.

If there was no job security for the day laborers, there wasn't any for the partners either. Despite staying under the radar we were constantly worried that we would run afoul of the unions, the mob, or the city inspectors. Since we were in steady demand, we finally decided that we should evolve into a real contracting firm. We could go legit if we scraped together about \$30,000 for an office and necessary equipment. Through family connections, a city contractor's license could be obtained



"oh fiddlesticks! you said east 21st street?"

without lengthy formalities and we decided to go for it. We would have to work harder and faster to raise the money. We were young, tough and stupid which, it turns out, is how a lot of successful people start.

Mike had a couple of other sidelines, which kept things interesting. He controlled a number of apartments around Manhattan that had old rent controlled leases but the original tenants had left long ago, leaving a real asset if you know how to work the system. One place was a three-bedroom unit at about 60th and 2nd with a tremendous view and a

cooperative doorman. Mike rented the place to a couple of very stylish professional women and he collected the rent from them on a weekly basis. You can imagine what sort of professional pays rent by the week. Mike also had a Turkish connection. One immediately thinks of drugs but the merchandise was carpets, furniture and great chests overflowing with brass samovars, candlesticks, hookahs and amber necklaces. His idea was to get a critical mass of Turkish stuff and sell it in bulk to Bloomingdales. Mike had set up a tent in his apartment and the place was piled several feet deep with all this colorful junk, which turned into a big liability when the Bloomy's deal fell through.

The Bronx in 1970

The Bronx was a nice neighborhood before the Depression but after that it was down, down, down. As you drove along the freeway to the Hamptons on Long Island to hang out with the smart set, you had to look at block after block of abandoned buildings and piles of rubble where buildings had collapsed.

Some bright light at City Hall actually came up with a \$75,000 plan to cover some of the window openings with steel shutters and have pictures of potted plants, pets and curtains painted on them to make the neighborhoods look lived in. The local folks thought this was pretty chump and the Bronx continued its downward spin.

In fact it became a not uncommon sight to see abandoned buildings burning on a hot Sunday afternoon, lit on fire just to generate some action. When the fire department showed up they were sniped at, so they stopped coming. This gave the neighborhood a definite charred character. I once told a lifelong New Yorker who lived on the Upper West Side that this was going on and that there were dozens of blocks of rubble with people living in the wreckage as if it was a war ravaged city. He was convinced that I was exaggerating but you can see it for yourself in the Paul Newman movie *Fort Apache, The Bronx*.

It doesn't look like this today, because a grassroots movement of local citizens seized the vacant land in the late '80s and claimed it under the Homestead Act (which had been enacted to populate the rural land out West) and they managed to build single family homes with real window boxes and curtains.

In the late '70s New York was on the verge of bankruptcy and there was talk of business flight to a healthier climate. But New York City turned out to have more resiliency than many people gave it credit for and came roaring back, like Muhammad Ali, to take back the title once again.

So it was back to scrounging and Mike landed a job in the worst part of the Bronx where landlords were abandoning buildings in ever increasing numbers.


Mike had agreed to demolish and remove a four-story apartment building on the edge of this area. A landlord thought it would be better to tear it down than risk having it torched, and jeopardizing his other building next to it. This would be the first complete building we would bring down and it would pay \$34,000 cash. Real contractors wouldn't work there, but we weren't real contractors and the money would be good if we could take the structure down efficiently. It was by far our largest job to date and Mike figured that the thing to do was to blow out two walls with a little dynamite and let the roof and floors carry the rest to the ground. Blowing up buildings in a densely occupied area has its problems. It is strictly illegal, for starters, but this neighborhood had a great deal of illegal activity already so we thought a loud noise would go more or less unnoticed, and we thought that Sunday would offer less interference from city agencies than other days of the week.

These old buildings are not steel reinforced; if you poke them hard enough they just crumble. Dynamite would be a lot more efficient than the ball and a nice change of pace, too. Mike had a source for the dynamite and on Saturday the three of us showed up at the site to set the charges. Miles and I strung the detonation wire around the perimeter and Mike placed nearly an entire case of dynamite around the walls. We would have to stay overnight in the building to make sure no one ran off with the explosives and also to keep squatters from coming back and being blown up the next day. We had solidly barricaded the ground floor and we parked our trucks inside and nailed ourselves in.

The neighbors had been watching us all afternoon and they heckled us as we went in and out. We were fairly sure that, because this building shared a wall with another in which several families lived, they wouldn't try to burn us down. If they did they would be surprised by the dynamite, but we would be blown to bits and out our money. We really just wanted the fee *and* no trouble but when you spend the night in an abandoned building in the Bronx, take it from me, there will be a certain amount of trouble. Keep in mind that there were no cell phones in the early '70s and we weren't armed, unlike everyone else in the Bronx over 13. We had hoped that The Mighty Quynne would stay with us and Miles offered him triple overtime but he just laughed and wished us luck. He said, in his deep voice, "You boys have all been to college but you are three of the dumbest white boys to ever walk God's green earth." Oh, what did he know. He lived in Queens. We brought camping gear and thought that it would actually be fun to hang out and catch Saturday night in the Bronx from an upper floor window. As it turned out this was just the first in a string of bad judgments. We had the ground floor pretty well secured but had not thought of the roof, so the

first assault came from above.

Four teenagers dropped through the roof hatch and surprised us as we were making dinner over a cook stove. We were so astonished and terrified at their unexpected arrival that we screamed and Mike grabbed the lit camp stove and a stick of dynamite from the box and chased them out. They were far more frightened than we were and they beat it back over the roof with a tale of the three lunatics willing to blow everybody up so they could camp out in the Bronx. A crowd gathered in the street below and started throwing bottles through the windows; a great many bottles, and sizable chunks of concrete as well. We retreated to an inner room, turned out the Coleman lamp and pretended not to be there. The worst case scenario was that we would toss out a warning stick of dynamite, and hope we didn't blow up some pimp's Cadillac, but we were fairly confident that because we were such incredibly unlikely visitors, we would get away with it for one night. And we did. But the night was long and the barrage of bottles and concrete didn't stop until dawn and we had to keep a constant watch on the perimeter.

In the morning, The Mighty Quynne showed up and even he was impressed by the amount of litter. With Quynne we went into the building next door to warn everyone that the adjacent building was going to explode soon and it would be a good idea if everyone went outside. The Mighty Quynne had brought donuts and beer for everyone and set it up some distance down the street. The building was only about half occupied and the lure of breakfast and the promise of some action gave us clear sailing by about 11. Mike had hoped to find a big plunger like we've all seen in the movies but all he could come up with was a switch so that would have to do. Mike set up his command post about a half a block away and we rolled detonator wire down the street toward the wasteland and hooked things up. Some of the guys who worked for us had showed up for the spectacle and together we kept the crowd back. We made one last pass for any stragglers and then we were set. It was pretty festive and at noon we yelled, "fire in the hole!" Mike turned the switch and 

The back and sidewalls exploded exactly as planned. The roof and floors started to give way and the floors pulled the front wall and most of the party wall came with it. It looked like we had achieved more than we had thought possible. But as we came closer we saw that the windows were missing all the way down the street and that there was a great deal more glass in the streets than there had been a few minutes before. I went in the front door of the building we had cleared only to be met by a woman coming out who was a little upset. Insanely upset, to be exact. I looked through the door at her apartment and was amazed

how completely pulverized it was. The TV had exploded and the very stuffing had burst out of the couch. The walls were stripped bare of plaster and the kitchen cabinets had burst to splinters.

We did what any normal person would do. We ran. The Mighty Quynne and I tore out in my truck, with a mob bearing down on us like the one that chased Frankenstein's monster through the streets. Mike had taken off through the rubble and I never saw him again, although I did talk to him on the phone a few days later. We had brought down the building with spectacular efficiency, but unfortunately the one next door had to be demolished as well and the several residents relocated. The landlord who hired us was nearly 70 at the time and I'm counting on him being in another profession at this point. My advice to him would be to hire a licensed contractor.

That same day I moved to a small town in Vermont.



Chapter 10.

THE WONDERFUL LEWIS LIGHT

Fire and tear gas drove me from Berkeley, an exploding building blasted me out of New York, and by the time I was 21 the FBI, Alameda County Sheriff's Department, Berkeley Police, New York City Police, UC Library Police and perhaps others were all anxious to have me in for a sit-down chat. I figured that if the FBI caught me for my part in the building demolition and I was convicted, then they wouldn't want to draft me. If I was snagged by the FBI for draft dodging first I would probably be drafted and then do time when I got out of the army. I pictured the headline, "Porn Star in Coast to Coast Bombing Ring." Big Al would have been proud.

I threaded back country roads all the way to Vermont and eventually pulled over to the side of a quiet country lane for the night. In the morning I realized I had parked next to an old cemetery. The serenity of the country was a relief after the frantic life I had been living in the city. I looked out at the boneyard and recalled an old vaudeville routine:

City Slicker (enthusiastically): "This is such healthful country. I don't imagine people die around here very often?"

Farmer (dryly): "Nope, only once."

I made some coffee on my camp stove and strolled among the tombstones. A suitably creepy ground fog caught in the cold stones. I read the names and jotted them down in the notebook I always carried, even then. Hiram Whitaker, Private Elias Stone, Baby MacNiven, Hosea



loaded with opportunity

Cotton Mather. This last one was undoubtedly a namesake of Reverend Cotton Mather, the fiery Boston minister who was the model for so many clergymen of the cruel-god persuasion. Whitaker again and yet again, and many others.

There were several women who had died between the ages of 16 and 25. This I attributed to childbirth: and of course there were the many stones of children; two days old, six months, a year. Here and there were men from the 1860s, cut down in the Civil War, though I

doubt their bodies were actually there. There was a cluster of stones for both men and women dated around the 1918 influenza epidemic. Centuries of birth and death commemorated in this quiet yard. Lives had been reduced to the murmur of a few brief words carved in granite and slate. And all around, the deeper silence of Indians.

Off to one side of the cemetery was a shed resembling a small garage. I opened the side door and was astonished to find a completely intact horse drawn hearse. It was in a tomb of its own, keeping silent vigil with four coffins stacked neatly against one wall. The smallest coffin was a mere two feet long. It had been carefully lined with muslin and padded with wood shavings, a last little gift of comfort for the long ride ahead. An exhausted pick leaned into one corner, next to a stubby shovel and wrecking bar, very like the one I had been using in New York. The bar sagged, blunted and bent from its long service of worrying open passages in the stony ground to the underworld below.

As I walked back along the road to my truck I saw a car coming out of the driveway of the house across from the cemetery. Two small girls peered inquisitively at me from the back seat. The name on the mailbox read: Whitaker.

As the sun inched up through the birches, it was not lost on me that I was in Robert Frost country. At the end of the cemetery wall, two roads did indeed diverge. To keep going, I would have to take the right or the left. Down each road I would find a completely different destiny. Like the hermit crab, I carried my dwelling on my back. I had left all those other houses behind. After a lifetime of wandering, I had yet to put down any sort of root into the soil. I fired up the truck and drove toward the end of the wall, swung left, and never looked back. I looked around to see if someone was shooting the scene, but damn, no film crew!

It was time to change my name again. One of the tombstones had read Baby MacNiven, B. Dec.16 D. Dec.19, 1948. Hummm...the chances of him having been a boy, 50/50, and very near my actual birth

date. I had seen in the movies that anyone could get a birth certificate from the county registrar, then a Social Security card, driver's license and so forth. So I became Jamis MacNiven. There is no reason this method wouldn't work just as well today. Even if I was in an old pickup I felt a little bit like James Bond in his Aston Martin



with his three-sided license plate, spinning up a new identity.

A few minutes later, I found myself in Bennington, Vermont. I knew this was a college town and thought that it would be a likely spot to hole up. I drove up to the college and pulled over to a group of girls* and asked them if there was a place a guy could take a shower. They laughed, and the prettiest of them told me that this was a women's college and that I would probably stick out in the shower room. They all thought this hugely funny and she said that if I would give them a ride home, I could use their place to clean up. Florie and three other women and two men lived in a big ramble of an 18th century farmhouse. It was an example of connected architecture, which you see here and there in mid-New England extending up into Canada, where it's the rule. The generations would add more buildings over time as they prospered. Out West the buildings are separated but where they are all linked, the result is an agreeable skelter of sizes. New England frugality saved the cost of one wall and there was the benefit of not having to go outside in heavy snow to tend the animals. The house in Bennington was a commotion of students coming and going, an environment in which I felt very much at home. By dinnertime, I had managed to wrangle a bunk in the barn. I ended up staying all winter.



florie

Florie was a sweet kid. She had gleaming auburn hair, dancing eyes and an enchanting way of curling her upper lip when she laughed. She was generous and loving and she immediately claimed me. I liked her but she was, perhaps, too accessible. I pictured myself as something of a rogue, a nonsmoking Bogart holed up in the woods. This innocent girl, steeped in Emily Dickinson and other sappy poets, was too tame for me. Years later, I heard that she became a top criminal prosecutor in New Orleans.

*Girls

In 1971 it was awkward to refer to a female college student as a *woman*. By 1975 the label 'woman' would be applied to every female over 12 and even to *men* who preferred to be called women. In the '60s we bravely said *black* when referring to African Americans and now that we are getting used to that some are insisting on the term 'People of African Origin.' I was sitting with my friend Hal Unger who is ah...well, a dark skinned African-American. His wife is also a person of African origin. I asked Hal where his wife was from and he said Cleveland. My wife, Margaret, was born in Rhodesia (now

Zimbabwe) and I said, "Hal, your wife is actually a woman from Cleveland and my wife is a person of African origin." Hal said, "True, and she is part Indian, too, so I think of her as a Cleveland Indian."

Later we will explore the differences between Eskimo and Inuit and become even more confused.

Because I had moved so much as a kid, I had experienced the seasons changing overnight but living in Vermont from late summer to spring I felt, for the first time, the smooth shifting of the earth's inclination and all this brings. Fall speaks a wholesale of colors, but it goes far beyond the colors. It's the split oak baskets piled high by itinerate Basque apple pickers. Kids making tunnels in heaps of raked maple leaves and later the scent of these piles flavoring the air as they are set alight in yards all over town. The Halloween decorations going up in the Woolworth's Five and Dime, an ancient brick building with creaking wooden floors and long open tables divided into cubicles, worn smooth by the endless restocking of rubber bands, harness wax, lamp wicks, thimbles and items poetically referred to as notions. Along one wall, the lunch counter was pillared at either end by cylindrical pie cases. The white Formica counter burnished right through the finish by the sleeves of generations of townsfolk sitting on the chrome-banded red Naugahyde stools. The old upholstery frugally patched in several places with downeast Yankee thrift. This is the sort of lunch counter that is long on cottage cheese, cherry cokes and tuna on white. Ninety cents plus ten cent tip and no tax.

It was time to get a job again, and I found one right away where they were building a ski lodge above the town. I had mixed a little bit of stucco in my time and the contractor needed someone to run the mixer. Now when I say I had mixed a little stucco, I mean a *very* little. My first day, I whipped up a batch and the hod carriers brought it to the mason, who attempted to lay it up on the wall. It slid right off. Plop! The mason looked over at me and snarled, then troweled up another pass. It stayed for a split second and then dropped to the ground. He put up a third and the same thing happened. I had forgotten the lime. I knew immediately that my credibility was shot so I beat a hasty retreat off the site as the mason yelled at me in language you might expect from Zsa Zsa.

On Being an Expert

I have never been one to let a lack of experience stop me from claiming to be an expert. My grandfather always told me that experts are just people who got there ten minutes before I did. I ended up not being very good at stucco but I have learned a few other things along the way.

1. Unless you have done something really pernicious, the cops



this put them out of business

I mistook a sidewalk for a street in Civitavecchia, a little kid yelled at me, ***“Forse imparerai a guidare all’inferno!”*** (Maybe you will learn to drive in hell!) And don’t worry about looking like a fool—everybody is faking it most of the time so you can, too.

On the other hand, I probably should have studied more French. I had been in the restaurant business for nearly a decade before I discovered that I had been misspelling the name of my profession and no one had ever caught it because they couldn’t spell it either. I was on the cover of a magazine once and they called me ‘The Radical Restaurateur.’ We all had a good laugh and I called up the publisher and told him he had forgotten the ‘n’ in *restaurant*eur. In the nicest possible way (when *he* stopped laughing) he told me that it was *moi* who was misinformed. Actually, I’m wrong a lot and it doesn’t bother me a bit. We all know people who will viciously defend the most absurd factoids because they heard them somewhere and have incorporated them into their reality. I like to keep an open mind for facts to flush in and out, even if a few rotting beach seals wash in occasionally.

I finally found a job as a laborer on the construction site of a small hospital at the edge of town. The excavation had begun without me but I was in time for the concrete. It was a three-story cinder block affair and the basic structure cost about a million dollars. Later I would build residential kitchens that would cost nearly as much.

The trees shed the last of their finery after a taste of the cold that would soon settle over us, and we raced to get the sub-slab plumbing, steel and electrical in place before the snow would make things more complicated. The rain proved to be a bigger problem than the snow;

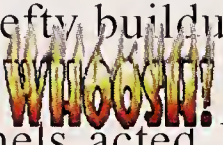
will eventually lose interest in you.

2. Start at the top of your profession if possible. If you can’t, consider that life is longer than young people imagine so start where you can.
3. Going to college is worthwhile but graduating doesn’t impress anyone but parents.
4. Learning a foreign language is a waste of time unless you spend a lot of time speaking to foreigners.*

*Exception—Always be ready to hurl curses in Italian. Once, when

you can't shovel rain. We poured the concrete by Christmas, and after each pour we covered the slabs with straw, which kept it from freezing before it cured. Concrete is magnificent stuff. Liquid stone, what a concept.

The coming winter pinched a little piece off of each day and if the sun came out at all it was a watery shadow of its summer self. The snow came suddenly and after a heavy fall we used big flame throwers to find our materials underneath the drifts. It was vitalizing to be outside all day long. We felt the seasons shift, from green to orange-yellow to a world of gray and white. One of our jobs was to build shelters of wood and plastic sheeting around the masons and maintain the heaters so the mortar wouldn't freeze. If any of it froze, a whole section of wall would have to be taken down. We took pride in our ability to move the enclosure we devised around the building as the walls rose. We felt like seamen, aloft in the yards of a clipper ship, keeping the headsails spanking tight as we rounded Cape Horn in foul weather. And we became aficionados of the Lewis Light. This was a dramatic effect first performed by Buddy Lewis when he lost his eyebrows and much of his beard.

The Lewis Light is created by cranking the valve of a commercial propane heater wide open and letting the gas run for a few seconds until there is a hefty buildup of propane. When you hit the starter, you get a fantastic  The heaters were inside the enclosure and the plastic panels acted like a lamp glass, making the flash look even bigger when seen from a distance. Each day we let in more gas and in a couple of weeks, none of us had any eyebrows left. We had to get the fires going at 6:00 a.m. and we generally had two teams setting up so we had a competition for the biggest flame. We should have realized that if we could see Main Street from the site, then Main Street could see us. We were developing a following among the early risers in town. One day the job superintendent had to come in early and as he was stepping out of the diner with his morning coffee, he was shocked to see his project going up in flames.

He arrived at the site just as Buddy was setting a new record, which I'm sure still stands in Bennington today as the stupidest stunt to pull in front of your boss. Buddy had put so much gas into the tent that it had set the walls alight. The super pulled in just as the place really did burst into flames. We had no choice but to throw Buddy, almost literally, onto his own pyre and we stood shoulder to shoulder with the boss in his decision to rid the site of this miscreant. There really wasn't much damage and Buddy has no doubt ended up as mayor.

A Cautionary Tale on the Advice of My Legal Department

Although I didn't invent The Lewis Light I certainly helped perfect it. I have always appreciated the grandeur of a dramatic explosion. Thirteen is the perfect age to fully appreciate blowing stuff up. As kids, we used to be able to buy this goop called Bangzit! I'm not sure if it actually came with an exclamation point but it should have. It was packaged in a yellow toothpaste tube but it *definitely* wasn't toothpaste. When mixed with a little water in a party balloon it gave off acetylene gas and inflated the balloon. When touched with a match it made a nifty explosion.



Back then over half the movies were about WWII or cowboys. It was not uncommon to see a boy walking around with a pair of Colt .45s strapped to his waist and perhaps a rubber knife and brass knuckles made out of aluminum foil. At one time I had all this as well as a pretty realistic rifle and a .32-caliber pistol stuck in my boot. Heavily armed children hiding behind cars and bushes were a common sight and no one thought anything of it. My own three boys grew up in the '80s and '90s and had no interest in this sort of thing at all but, of course, they had Nintendo. None of the weapons actually did anything but shoot caps and annoy sisters. Caps were boring and we didn't bother with them but we did use Bangzit! to simulate the sound of land mines and mortar sieges.

My friend John was really good with this stuff. John lived in an ill-kept farmhouse with uncountable siblings and invisible parents. The perfect mix for mayhem. John had a neighbor down the street he absolutely hated named Miller. I don't know what Miller's crime was, but we had sworn revenge. Now John had this dog named Cheetah. It was a powerful little monster with a mouth full of snaggly, yellow teeth. Cheetah acted like a perfectly normal dog until someone would yell, "Cheetah the wolf!" and in an instant the dog would go completely insane. Everyone had to run for the trees and clamber out of the way of Cheetah's snapping jaws. The dog would attack anybody left on the ground and bite them viciously. I first met John after Cheetah bit me on the face and I got blamed for taunting the dog. I'll bet there was a similar problem between Cheetah and Miller, because the deposits from the south end of the dog figured critically in our plot.

John's plan went like this: we would tie a balloon full of Bangzit! to a rock, and set it on Miller's front porch, next to a paper bag filled with Cheetah crap. John was very careful. The bag had to be a thin one so it would have just the right give under foot. The idea was to

twist the bag until the contents were packed tight. John planned to hide in the bushes across the street with his BB gun. Spicy Hobbs and I were assigned to light the bag on fire, hit the bell and take off. Miller would then come to the door and John would shoot at the balloon. The fire would set off the gas with a satisfying explosion and then the startled Miller would stomp on the bag before he could figure out that he had been stung by the classic flaming bag of dog crap, which he might not fall for otherwise. This was a legendary stunt that we all had heard of but John was the only one I ever met who actually tried it.

In trials, the exploding balloon worked pretty well but we stopped short of actually jumping on the bag. John missed the balloon once so Spicy gave him his gun in case he needed a second shot. On the designated Sunday morning (Sunday is the best day to blow things up!), we saw Miller come out in his bathrobe for the newspaper. We took up our positions; Spicy and I sneaked onto the porch and installed the ordinance. I pushed the bell and we ran around between the houses. Miller came to the door but he didn't step outside as we had imagined he would. John took his shot anyway, missed and took another. Miller yelped as the second shot took him in the leg. He immediately sized up the fact that some damn kid was shooting at him with a BB gun. He shot across the street, grabbed John and started to drag the kid home by his hair with one hand, brandishing the incriminating BB guns in the other. As they were crossing the street the balloon exploded with a fury. Then Miller abruptly changed direction and hauled his captive inside, slamming the door.

Spicy and I stared at the front door. We expected the raging Miller to pitch the poor kid's bones out in a few minutes but actually John's father made a rare appearance and he didn't look at all happy. We were praying that we wouldn't be implicated. Even though they tried to shake John down for the list of conspirators, he didn't give us up.

As grownups we laugh at the antics of our youth and wonder how we made it in one piece into adulthood. Well actually, all of us didn't.

Fooling around with explosives really did lead to no good. I was not supposed to go over to John's house because of the dog so I wasn't there when Spicy blew the tips of his fingers off and lost an eye. Spicy had snapped the heads off an entire box of wooden kitchen matches and packed the match heads into a length of pipe. He was screwing a cap on the end when the pressure set it off, taking with it any possibility that Spicy would ever play the oboe. After they took him to the hospital, we looked all over the garage for the fingertips but Cheetah got there before us.

Never do this!

With Buddy gone we looked for other forms of entertainment so we started hanging out at the local horse racing track. One of the carpenters was a part-time trainer and we would go over on the weekends with some of the girls from Bennington College. I had been there a half a dozen times when one day the trainer said it was time to

bet. I had never bet on anything before but he said this was the day to bet on his horse, Hamburger Madness. He confided that he had been holding the horse back so even though the horse was in at 20 to 1, this was Hamburger's day. Apparently this is a common stunt but it can't be pulled more than once per horse especially if the horse has such a memorable name. The long gone Green Mountain Track was quite small so a bunch of big bets would have been suspicious. In NYC or Vegas we could have bet the ranch, if we had had one, or used local bookies, if we had known any, but I just put up 60 bucks and let Hamburg run. And run he did. But the jockey gave him just a little too much of his head because this pony ran so fast that he was nearly over the finish line before the others came into view. It was obvious to everyone that even though the horse might be a champ, the trainer and the jockey were chumps so when we went to collect we were told to wait for the track owner and the cops. Running from the cops again!

What with dodging the draft, blowing up buildings in the Bronx and shilling at the track I was starting to feel like a criminal. I didn't think this was my destiny so I figured I had better find a profession and settle down. I thought of faking a law degree and going into politics but then the "dee-vine bo-vine" stepped in and took me by the hand.



Chapter 11.

COWS COWS COWS

By late spring 1972 the hospital construction job had come to a close so I suggested to Florie that we move to New York City for the summer. Nothing could have been less appealing to her. Florie had taken up photographing cows, and painted delicate realistic portraits of them from the pictures. I went with her sometimes on her expeditions to the pastures and started a series of cow sculptures in clay.

We were about ten years too early to capitalize on the iconographic cow movement. Starting in the early '80s, the cow had a run of a couple of decades before finally burning itself out with the cow projects in several large cities. The Cow Parade started in Zurich. The city fathers and mothers provided full-sized fiberglass casts of cows to local artists who modified them in all sorts



holsteins

of fanciful ways and then auctioned them off for charity. About a dozen cities around the world followed suit, from the obvious Chicago (supposedly burned by Mrs. O'Leary's cow) to the unlikely Montevideo, Uruguay (where there are no O'Learys.) This was the ultimate in cow branding. The Cow Projects begat imitators: moose in Toronto, hogs in Cincinnati, sharks in San Jose, ponies in Santa Fe and golden retrievers in Aspen. If Florie and I had just thought to trademark the cow we would have been in fat city.

Beware the Troll with Mismatched Socks?

Along the cultural food chain you have fine art at one end and kitsch at the other. A couple of notches up from the bottom is the world of kids' toys. The toy business is almost an alternate universe and a big one at that. At one point Nintendo alone accounted for 10% of the exports from Japan. He-Man, Garbage Pail Kids, Transformers, Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles, Teddy Ruxpin, Micro Machines, Cabbage Patch Kids and Pokémon are the flash-in-the-pan toys that inhabit a world separate from Barbie and GI Joe. Barbie has been around since the Pleistocene and shows no sign of becoming a grandmother but ask

for one of those incredibly repulsive Tickle Me Elmo dolls in a toy store today and they will have no idea what you are talking about.

One of the great *faux pas* in the toy world occurred when someone in the legal department was golfing when he should have been billing hours, and the creators of the troll doll failed to file for a trademark. Many people have forgotten that 15 years ago a significant percentage of the GNP of the industrialized world went into the manufacturing and distribution of these hideous little dolls with their azure, lime and carrot colored haircuts. Troll dolls were being made by anyone with a phone and a fax, so you can just imagine the slipshod construction as the dolls reproduced and mutated like sewer rats fed a steady diet of radium-soaked Oreos.

On one of the farms Florie and I met a funny man in a straw hat named Von Trapp. I asked him if he was related to one of the Von Trapps from *The Sound of Music*, the family who danced and sang their way across the edelweiss littered hillside and straight into our hearts, while running from the Nazis. He was one of the kids. I'll bet you thought that they were some made-up movie family, but they were real enough. Maria Von Trapp ended up opening a successful ski resort in Vermont where Von Trapp had grown up. He sold dairy milking machines all over the eastern seaboard, and claimed that he knew, "ever-y inch of roadway for one thousand miles in all dee-rections and some of the half-inch roads too." He had a funny way of speaking, pure Vermont dialect with a radio preacher's way of splitting words up in new ways. Von Trapp probably had a first name but he never used it. Everyone just called him Von Trapp.

In his sales pitch, Von Trapp would bring up the family connection as an icebreaker with the famously reserved farmers. It is always safe to bet that a Yankee farmer will be anti-Nazi and pro-Julie Andrews. Von Trapp was a very funny guy and his wit made a neat counterpoint to the dour Yankee dairyman. Whether it's a 30-head hard rock farm or a well-to-do thousand acres with 300 head, dairy farming is an entirely humorless business. A little levity worked wonders. Florie was taking pictures of a herd of Guernseys one afternoon when she saw Von Trapp, a small man, out of place in his business suit and shiny shoes, standing with a farmer so big that his overalls had real potential as a circus tent.

It was late in the day and the red barn drew the final brilliance from the setting sun as it winked briefly from beneath the apple trees, flush with their vanity of raw spring leaves. Von Trapp had his hands on his hips in his characteristic stance, head thrown back, hooting at his own joke; his hat perched on the back of his head as if kept in place by an



herefords by florie

enchantment. The two of them were laughing at some barnyard tale Von Trapp was spinning; both of them enjoying this moment in the sun.

Von Trapp had been ambling toward his car when he spotted us. He altered course to see what we were up

to. Florie had a few of her photos with her and Von Trapp recognized some of the herds and told us something about what living on the farm was like, from a cow's perspective. "I know some cows who are better off than their owners." He reflected a moment, as if weighing the truth of such a statement. "Well," he assured us, "that would be a fact...a-yup." Von Trapp told us he was headed into town for dinner and thought that it would be "grand to team up and sup together," and to continue our discussion of the "dee-vine bo-vine."

We went to one of those country diners that have all but disappeared in this century. Back then, they baked scores of different kinds of pies, and specialized in down-home fried chicken and many of the country comfort foods I would later put on the Buck's menu. It might have been at that very diner where I realized that bigger is better and that's why a stack of pancakes at Buck's is the size of a hat. Von Trapp told us of his childhood in Europe. He was still a boy when he discovered the pleasures of manhood with a milkmaid in an alpine barn. He claimed that she lured him into the barn with a bar of chocolate, an experience that resulted in life long love of both dairy farms and chocolate. The man was a gifted storyteller, and Florie and I laughed so hard that the ancient woman who was operating an equally ancient cash register kept cranking out frosty looks over her half glasses.

As slices of fresh peach pie hove into view, the fact emerged that Von Trapp needed an understudy in the milking machine racket and he thought it should be me. "There are farmers to please," he declaimed, "and cows to ease," and the farmers could be persuaded to unbend a long folded dollar or two for a modern dairy parlor. "A-yup, they would surely do that," he said. Von Trapp eyed my hair and beard, a style that branded me as a close relation of Karl Marx. I was reluctant to cut the family ties, but Von Trapp peddled the job as being more like a theatrical event than the typical 9-to-5, and he was such a magical performer that I was soon persuaded to turn my hand to the dee-vine bo-vine.

By the time we left the diner, the deal was sealed. In the parking lot I noticed that Von Trapp walked like a bandmaster in a parade,

shoulders square, head moving back and forth as if to some inner music. I was to discover that he always walked like that but he sort of walked it bigger if he had just made a sale. This man talked more than anyone I had ever met, including my grandfather. One farmer told me, not unkindly, that Von Trapp could convince a double yoke out of a rooster. His mind was chock-full of the world, filed, indexed, and 'col-lated and ree-bated' with all relevant facts at the ready. Before the internet, there was Von Trapp. His memory was prodigious and he remembered facts both common and arcane. He recited lists of facts for fun and even a list of these lists would cover the wide side of a barn. He memorized all the farmers' names and kin and had at the ready:

- All sitting US senators, congressmen, Supreme Court justices and cabinet officers.
- The winners of the Kentucky Derby, including the Triple Crown winners *and* the corresponding amounts of prize money.
- The winners of the Miss America pageants and the first runners-up from day one.
- The lineage to three generations of all of the important cows on our route.

When I asked him how he managed this extraordinary feat he replied, "I don't rot my mind with tel-e-vision, my liver with firewater or my heart with women." In fact, this last timesaver was something he never wanted to talk about but I always knew there had been some early and permanent heart damage from the opposite sex. The only thing I didn't like about Von Trapp was his damn banjo. It was colorful, sure, but he insisted on playing it at full gallop inside his Volvo as I drove us down the road. Even with earplugs, I'm sure I lost a good deal of hearing in my right ear. *Jimmy Crack Corn* again? Swell.

Von Trapp was oddly dressed by any measure. He wore a suit that was too big for him and exhausted neckties so weedy that they wouldn't have been good for a suicide. He had big feet for a small man and wore black shoes with an uncommonly high polish. It was all an act even if the milking machines were real enough. Von Trapp took me to a thrift shop where I was outfitted with two dandy suits so long out of style that they would have made Willy Loman blush. With my shiny black shoes and short hair I felt like a spy from the Left Coast in the land of the Yankee farmer. We were traveling salesmen, a-yup! How excessively bizarre. Once I was dressed, Von Trapp declared that "all gussied up" I looked "awful dern dee-vine."

The New England dairy farmer is by far the most elusive prey in the birch and maple tree jungle. Even though some of them were very well off, the idea of buying a new car, say, was as foreign to them as

buying a yacht with a helicopter deck. They did need milking machines but they all had them already. The idea was to prove to these intransigent, granite-willed characters that the benefits of a new installation would pay for itself. I look back now and see so clearly the good sense of these steady farmers. The equation looks like this: *Sweat X Tradition = A farm improved from when you took it over plus chil-*



“mu-ud, a-yup”

dren, grandchildren and enough to retire on. Seems simple enough. The equation was so very different when the 20th century slammed shut on us in Silicon Valley.

In art, cows are universally depicted as tidy animals. In real life, they are splattered with mud and worse. Von Trapp would lug the portable

unit into the stall for a demonstration no matter what the weather. In fact, he preferred it to be muddy because he would act as if ruining his shoes in the muck was no matter to him at all and his suit...well, you can imagine. One of his props was his Corfam shoes. Corfam was a shoe company that made a one-piece cast plastic shoe during the '40s. These shoes were cold in winter and hot in the summer but they held their shine and when they became dull, a buffing wheel brought them back, ready for duty. Von Trapp had about a dozen pair but they were one size smaller than my feet and my dogs were always barking.

Now a milking machine is a thing to behold. Cows have to be milked twice a day and for thousands of years the only way to milk a cow was to sit on a small stool, reach under and well, milk the cow. Just the thought sends shivers up and down the spines of most people, but on a farm it is common enough. So is lopping the head off a chicken, but never mind about that.

I worked alongside Von Trapp for the summer and he taught me “the ropes, strings and threads” of selling the “dee-vine De Laval,” that being the brand we were peddling. New York City would have to wait. Our peak season was winter because it was easier to get a farmer’s attention when he wasn’t haymaking or fence-mending. Winter was a time to contemplate things. Traveling in the winter in New England and Canada can be downright dangerous and we drove through blizzards that would have given polar bears pause. On more than one occasion I spent the night at a farm when it was impossible to travel. Before *le* Holiday Inn made us positively lust for drinking glasses and toilet

seats 'sanitized for our protection' it was a practice of farmers to put up travelers. The perennial salesman/farmer cliché was never far from my mind. I know what you're thinking: did I ever get lucky on a farm?

I did indeed. It happened when I was trapped under a colossal snowfall near Quebec City. I had spent the afternoon with a French Canadian farmer and the blizzard came in so fast and fierce that the outside world disappeared while we were inside the barn. The farmer spoke very little English and my French was nonexistent, but one of the kids was there to help translate. Henri was an Alp of a man with an immense beard and hands so big that when he shook mine I felt like a little kid.

I wish I could recount that there was a comely farmer's daughter in pigtails but there wasn't. Henri did have two sons, however, and since it was impossible for them to go to school, we played bingo and watched French Canadian TV shows. His herd was of the Charolais persuasion. This cow gives a milk higher in fat than most others and is prized for its dense cream.

I stayed there for three days, under a mountain of snow, with a family so completely opposite from the one I had grown up in. The farm itself had been in the family for four generations and I doubt if any of them could juggle. Madeleine had a whirlwind of ginger hair, swept up and corralled under a bonnet while she worked in the kitchen. Her face was more freckle than not and she had a ready smile to my comments even though I knew her command of English was even less steady than Henri's. Madeleine wore a gingham apron, the type generally reserved for storybook characters or Ozark apple dolls. They had a dog of uncertain heritage named Clay. For Cassius Clay maybe? No, I found out it he was named for an uncle, of uncertain heritage, named Klee.

What I remember most is the food. The farmhouse doubled as the world's finest French restaurant, and I enjoyed a daughterless three-day gastronomic love affair. The Frenchman, in France, sees himself at the epicenter of a confluence of European culinary traditions of which he is the heart, sweetbreads and sole. Francophiles come from all over the world brandishing oversized forks and swooning at the feet of the French because they have, like no one else, pushed food all the way past art, approaching the divine. That is not to say that there are not many good things to eat in other cultures but the French are *numero uno* as food dudes. If you don't believe me just ask a French chef. In Canada, however, the French Canadians have been cut adrift from the mother ship and like Darwin's Galapagan lizards stranded on separate islands, they have cultivated their own traditions.

Mine is not the dissertation of an anthropologist but the lowdown from a traveling milking machine salesman stranded along the St.


Lawrence River, near the village of Sault-au-Mouton, with one specific family and some unintelligible TV characters.

This I remember: breakfast, a warm brioche with a center somewhere between mascarpone and whole milk yogurt and what I think were flecks of vanilla bean—a sort of a creampuff with a Ph.D. On the table, a crock of made-yesterday butter and homemade wild strawberries—preserved in clay jars with poured wax tops. The strawberry jar covered with cheesecloth was tied with a short length of red yarn.

Madeleine was happy to have me poke about the cellar and I discovered that hanks of yarn were used to identify the contents of the jars. Brown for apple butter, lavender for bogberry and red twisted with green for cranberry with lime rind. On the second evening, I found a small jar tied with orange traced with yellow. I carried it upstairs for the next day's breakfast. Inside was a sour tangerine marmalade that was the single finest thing I had ever eaten, or, as I am resigned to realize now, I will ever eat. Madeleine pushed the half-finished jar on me as one of several parting gifts when I left. She could not have known, but I would forever measure food and its preparation by this time at Madeleine's hearth in the farmhouse under the snow. Gazing up from their baskets on the earthen floor the bright faces of apples, red, nearly red and yellow, and hampers of dust colored potatoes and turnips. Onions slumped in loose jute sacks like tired field hands, scales of golden skin flaking and rustling when they were moved, momentarily awakened from their winter slumber. The rafters (cut economically on two sides only) had evenly spaced wooden pegs, each with bound bundles of herbs or small drawstring bags of mushrooms hanging like wigs of old dolls. All of this bounty waited mutely to take its place of authority in the kitchen when summoned.

The days in the far north are very long in midsummer and the strawberries gave back the ripe sunny days of summer in a world otherwise made of snow. Vast cups of strong coffee with cream, warm from the morning milking; sausage from the farm, split and sizzling in a cast iron skillet; potatoes laced with dried green onions fired in the pan with the sausage drippings; and around us, the windows reflecting steadily the pale *écru* of the wallpaper or dancing suddenly with a blaze of flame when Madeleine stoked the kitchen fire.

Life centered around the mammoth stone clad, iron stove. It heated the entire house, cooking the food and warming body and soul. At one end of the kitchen were a line of mittens and gloves on pegs, akimbo, like some warehouse for cartoon hand animators. Above them, a row of woolen caps graduated both in size and the level of childishness of its

owner. Six-year-old Charley, or Shar-lee, as they called him, had a lemon yellow cap with a smiley face woven on the front, its eyes the size and color of Charley's jet black ones, giving him an odd, double face. Madeleine's was a basic  tourist number. Henri's was a no-nonsense homespun rainbow of remembered yarns, approaching eternal in age, the repairs having overwhelmed the original. I wore my rabbit lined suede flight cap, which when untied gave me a Rocky Raccoon look and when tied under my chin made me feel like a kid looking for his lost bicycle.

I remember lunch: preserved heirloom tomatoes, cheated of their summer pelts—purple, yellow, green striped and misshapen red, common enough now but back then exceedingly odd. There was pickled corn, onions and carrots. There were pickled beets, pickled leeks and even pickled pickles. There was a convention of cheeses, some made at this farm and others taken in trade. My favorite was a sort of Port Salute creamy Stilton. The stuff of legends. This cheese was surely made by elves. They start with a loaf of brown bread set aside in the cellar to turn green. Using a large syringe, a column of bread is extracted from the moldy loaf and several of these are injected at odd angles into a tub of soft cheese. In a few weeks it becomes a firm two-kilo wheel.

Charley and I came in from the yard, our third time that morning, working the drifts back from the windows and stomp, stomping the snow from our boots in the mudroom, biting off our gloves and pulling off our coats, entering the kitchen in felt boot liners and wool shirts, too hot almost at once. Madeleine ladled out fruit jars of warm apple cider, the faint touch of fermentation no doubt to amuse both the cheese and me. Jules came in from the henhouse with his basket of pale blue eggs—eggs confused by the motion, maybe, but still hopeful, as they dreamed their egg dreams.

The table bread fresh as an instant, a seductive, mid-morning loaf barely concealed under a thin towel, like a stripper from a hot climate, her tender leather slick and brown from an egg wash. Five or maybe six cheeses arranged like forest dwellers around a mock campfire of preserved beans, green and waxed. The beans tossed with hominy corn that had been re-hydrated and pan-scorched with a little molasses in goose fat. Pear butter (yarn color: sorrel and celadon) and cow butter for the bread. A soup of red tomatoes smaller than acorns, dotted with chunks of pumpkin and topped with a spill of cream and a slight dusting of nutmeg having blown in, no doubt, from some far off Samarqand oasis.

After two days of no tomorrows the sky suddenly ran out of snow. We spent the morning shoveling a path to the road a quarter mile away.

Then we loaded the milk cans for sledding to the road. The sled was pulled by a horse so big that we could stand on the sled and ride, although walking kept us warmer. I realize now that the horse was probably much smaller than he appeared under his heavy winter coat. One of the boys had to trim the hair around his eyes or his steamy breath would ice up his face. I knew how he felt. At the time I had a dramatic moustache, which I thought made me look like a Civil War figure. After the first trip out to the main road and back, it grew an unwieldy ice floe in danger of calving and taking my upper lip with it. Henri never seemed to ice up. I saw that his trick was to exhale through his lips with a faint whistle and he always seemed to be sucking and blowing some tuneless tune like heaving a line to a shanty. So we worked under the low eye of a cold sun, Henri and the boys because they had to, and me because I wanted to eat more.

Dinner on that last night was lamb stew with root vegetables. It had been heated in a ceramic crock to a certain temperature in the oven and then taken out and wrapped in a small woolen blanket to finish. The wine was locally made from grapes grown in Upstate New York. Even the children drank a little wine mixed with water. The French are known for this custom and although they have the highest alcohol consumption in the world, they have very low rates of alcoholism. There has been a lot of yack yack on this and I'll leave it to others to sort out. The French do die eventually, but mostly from apoplexy over things not French enough.

Dessert was *tartine au sirop d'érable et crème fraîche* consisting of bread, stiffened slightly by its proximity to the hearth, cut into small blocks floating on a shallow sea of fresh cream. Over this was drizzled maple syrup. I highly recommend sitting by the fire and watching a goofy quiz show on TV in French while eating *tartine au sirop* after a day wrangling milk cans, farmer's daughter or no. I wish Von Trapp had been there but he was unaccountably in South Carolina, no doubt chopping cotton and playing the banjo.



Von Trapp and I must have driven every back road from eastern Ohio to Eastwick, Newfoundland that winter. We always took time to see the sights and we roamed north to the Hudson Bay in search of white bears and to the Chesapeake in search of blue crabs. Our trade took us to places that are the very definition of 'the sticks,' and some medium sized cities in between, but it takes more than traffic lights to bestow cityhood. Take Erie, Pennsylvania. Please. My guess is you've heard of it but you haven't ever been there. I've been there plenty of

times. The locals call it the “mistake on the lake.” I can’t imagine that anyone moves there unless they have made an unwise choice of a spouse or are in the witness protection program. I’m quite sure nothing has happened there since they built the canal in 1825, which was nowhere near the town. It is ironic that in a place where nothing much ever happens so much happened to me.

It was just after Christmas and I was in transit from Erie to Toronto. I planned to rent a car in Canada and drive to Guelph, Ontario where I had the final meeting with the three brothers MacNaughton. They had over 400 head of Holsteins and their equipment was serviceable but wearing out. We were nearing the end of an epic struggle with the three of them holding on to one end of a penny and Von Trapp and I holding onto the other end and trying to pull it free. They say this is how wire was invented.

The farmers were easy enough to reach because they are as predictable as the phases of the moon but it was exceedingly difficult for Von Trapp and me to reach one another. Try to imagine a time before email, cell phones and answering machines (this was the same century in which we used carrier pigeons). Von Trapp and I didn’t have an office so we had no secretary. We had standing call times but Von Trapp had missed his for two days. I was becoming annoyed and worried in equal measures. 30 years ago I thought of him as an old man and with his peculiar mannerisms he seemed like a much older relic, but he was only 56. On the third day Von Trapp’s landlady answered his phone and the news was as bad as it could be. When you see as many cows as he did you are as expert as any veterinarian and Von Trapp had been examining a very sick cow on a farm in New Hampshire. Keep in mind that on small farms the cows are like family members and when one is sick the farmer gets pretty concerned. Somehow the cow fell and rolled over on Von Trapp and there he died. The woman on the phone had been Von Trapp’s landlady and I always suspected she was a little in love with him. I stammered that I would have to make a stop in Toronto and I would get back as soon as I could. She was as upset as I was but she said, “The dead will keep.” Just like that: “the dead will keep.” He was buried in his best old suit and Corfam shoes, not so very far from the cemetery where I had taken my name.



von trapp with understudy

Chapter 12.

THE 3-MINUTE WEDDING

I had been on the road so long that I felt like a sailor, but one with no homeport. The girlfriends of the preceding years were now just photographs. I had neglected to tie myself to friends, as I never knew where I was going to be next. Von Trapp and I had such a good time together that when he died I realized in an instant that he was my only real friend. I had many acquaintances but nowhere to call home because I was generally down the road by the second milking.

I shuffled across the runway at the Erie airport, as snow pirouetted all around. I had on a sheepskin coat so hairy it looked as if it had come from a mastodon, and I wore a brown corduroy suit with pitifully small lapels and a spidery tie in an era when those appendages had grown as wide and garish as the gut on a retired Miami mobster. In the early '70s, Allegheny Airlines still flew DC3s, a plane used today principally for drug trafficking. I squeezed in just before they shut the door. There were two empty seats. The first was next to an attractive woman about my age in the front row. There was no way I wanted to chat, so I moved to the last empty seat and there was an even more attractive woman next to it so I was stuck. She said later that I looked like a grumpy cave-man in my wooly, snow covered coat smelling of the barnyard.

Even in my bleak mood I couldn't help but notice she was unaccountably crocheting a hideous purple pillow cover, right there in public, if you can call the last seat of a DC3 public. Old ladies crocheted, not attractive young women. I had to ask her what was up with the needles and yarn. I don't remember what she said because her voice was so different from what I had expected. She had a refined English schoolgirl lilt and I suddenly noticed the long blond hair and stunning eyes. Somehow the little balls of purple yarn she was conspiring with seemed completely irrelevant. Sour tangerine marmalade comes with orange and yellow yarn. Margaret came with two shades of lavender.

I explained to her that I was on my way to Guelph and she looked at me in surprise as she was going to Guelph, too, where she lived. Talking to her pushed back the despair for a few minutes. It was a very short flight but mercifully the airplane was so slow it could have doubled as a crop duster. I offered her a lift to Guelph but she said she had a ride. I promised to call her when I came back to town. A month later, I did. Margaret and I were scheduled to meet at the entrance to the University of Guelph ice castle that the students construct every year.

Hey, it's Canada. In Canada they think ice is simply swell. I was right on time as I walked from my hotel toward the castle in the distance. Ahead of me, I saw a woman in a long blue wool coat walking quickly in the same direction. As I caught up with Margaret it came to me suddenly that this was the woman I would marry. Margaret's radiant smile was encouraging but I thought I had better wait a bit to deliver the news.

Dr. Margaret Reid was a recent émigré England and was involved in a research project as a post doc in biochemistry. She was an Oxford grad and her specialty was amino acid transport. She hung out with the Watson and Crick crowd of double helix fame. We planned to go see Marshall McLuhan who was speaking at the university later that night. Dr. Reid had to sneak me up the stairs to her top floor rooms above a nice little old lady. This landlady had thrown a protective net over Margaret and she would have been scandalized if she had found a caveman in the attic. Margaret led me upstairs in silence and left me to explore the simple possessions of a proper English woman while she took a bath. The thin walls of this place were a mere paint job punctuated with a couple of doors and I could hear her splashing about and even the tune she was humming as she sponged herself in the old claw footed tub while my eyebrows jumped around with the possibilities.

Margaret made a simple stew which, when combined with the company, rivaled Madeleine's. After dinner we went to the McLuhan lecture. He was a big thinker but he was trendy, and trendy thinkers often turn out to be pan-flashes. He was famous for saying, "The medium is the message." Some trends have proven solid and enduring like The Doors, but others like Jim Bakker's piety and Eric Fromm's sanctity were just card tricks invented to meet chicks. At least Jim Morrison was upfront about it. I didn't know much about McLuhan but that night I learned all I needed to know. His message was about as durable as skywriting. Margaret and I were in the balcony of the packed auditorium



farm girl, ph.d.

to listen to this man tell us what was up. This is what was up: he came out on stage and set a tape recorder on a chair then adjusted the microphone and just stood there to illustrate some absurd point that the tape was ‘the message’ and then he walked off the stage and left us with a tape recording of him speaking. This was his whole act. It was a completely dismissive gesture and entirely boring. I immediately thought that sneaking past the landlady again would be about several magnitudes more interesting. Two more seconds of this nonsense and Margaret seconded this conclusion. I had no trouble identifying bullshit, having just spent several years standing in it. And anyway, Margaret was prepared to be swept off her feet and I was the janitor.

With Von Trapp gone, I had the task of wrapping up the pending deals but he took the fun with him when he left and I realized that I had spent enough time standing in plastic shoes talking with dairy farmers. I weighed my ephemeral life against that of the farmers I knew, with their solid underpinnings, and decided the show had had its run. It was time to go back to New York and to take Margaret with me. On our third date I asked her to quit her hard won job in the teeming metropolis of Guelph. I asked her to abandon this land of ice castles and orderly sidewalks populated by polite students and professors smoking pipes in sensitive tweed coats with leather patches at the elbows for a slimy apartment in a city where the rats carry knives and the prostitutes carry guns. “Sounds good to me,” she said in her best Oxford twang.



I had the notion that I could be a successful New York artist. I had amused myself in the post-Florie epoch by fashioning tiny sculptures that fit with my nomadic life. Margaret and I found a place on the Upper West Side, and I proceeded to work night and day on a collection that I figured would be “just the very thing, a-yup!” I planned to hold a one-man show and go immediately to the top of my game. Margaret would be my muse and we would bask in the bohemian glow of the Big Apple.

We were New Yorkers. We jogged around the reservoir in Central Park, we ran into John and Yoko at a party and we pitied all things not New York. We saw Warhol and the Velvet Underground. We went to the N.Y. premiere of John Waters’ *Pink Flamingos*. We toured the galleries and museums ceaselessly, taking the measure of the city with the notion that I would lay siege to the art world and hustle myself a prominent place in it. The sculpting was going well and I had enough money saved from the last few years to get a good grip on things before the burdensome bear-hug of fame came calling with its drooling adulents

and bulging bags of cash. We made stylish friends and did stylish things like sharing a house on Fire Island. Someone once called Fire Island “a finger pointed at Paris” and indeed it was. This was the island where pirates of old used the neat trick of tying a lantern to a horse and walking it along the beach at night so it would appear to be a ship underway, thereby tricking unwitting captains into steering onto the beach.

The influence of the pirates is why Fire Island turned gay. Thirty years ago, being gay was daring and chic and the most hip crowd imaginable flocked to the island like gulls to a pile of fish heads. Small villages sprouted along the spit of sand, which, though several miles long, was only a few hundred feet wide. There were no cars and everyone walked to the houses along planked pathways pulling red wagons with supplies. The houses were a genial jumble of palazzo and shack. Status was bestowed based on physical beauty and degree of suavity. How very like Paris.

On our first trip to the island, we drove along the Long Island Expressway (known as the world's largest parking lot) and passed a billboard advertising gin. It featured a handsome man with a chiseled jaw and an elegant woman, steaming up the sign with their confident good looks. Sexy and classy. I suddenly realized that I knew the man in the picture, but Margaret



just friends

was sure that this was me talking through my hat. “But, Margaret, I’m not wearing a hat.” Later that day as we walked along the beach to our house a man wearing only a late July tan and dramatic set of perfect teeth came bounding along the beach yelling my name. He threw his arms around me in a sweaty greeting. It was my gorgeous billboard friend.

We shared the house and neighborhood with some wonderful characters. Edward Albee wrote *Who’s Afraid of Virginia Woolf* in the house next door. This was the same house where the painter Willem de Kooning putzed around from time to time. I once helped him carry a large canvas wrapped in brown paper and twine from the ferry to the house. “Hey, Willy, sign my arm, would you, buddy?” We saw Capote with his band of Angels in tow and Liza Minnelli with her husband Peter, who sure looked gay to us. Well, that was their business. It was the Fire Island of 1974. One can’t go to Fire Island and check in like Orlando. Back

then, it was by invitation only and I imagine it still is.

My art unfolded easily, ideas coming faster than I could execute. I was working on a series of miniature creatures in the midst of life: tourists taking pictures, cockroaches piloting aircraft, elephants driving Indy cars, and fantasy barnyards with strange goings-on. The pieces were made of porcelain clay and then fired, prior to my painting them with acrylics. I had managed to attract the notice of a gallery in SoHo and was in full swing when my work exploded. I don't mean that I was on the cover of *Art News*. I mean my work literally burst into pieces.

I had arranged for a large firing at a ceramics studio. I had all of my pieces in one kiln and it was set to fire over a weekend. I was itching to get my hands on the goods on Monday because I saw the clay as a blank canvas and the paint as the expression. On Monday I went in and the owner of the shop was livid about something. He said I had ruined his kiln with my inexperience and claimed that all of my pieces had been full of air pockets and that every piece had shattered. They had been picking the shards out of the chinks in the bricks for hours and had unceremoniously dumped the remains into several paper bags.

I was so shocked that I just stared down at the bags. I had been firing pottery and sculptures throughout high school and college and knew I didn't have air pockets. I looked at the ruined clay and saw that it had shattered into broad flat shards indicative of too fast a firing. Imagine planning a performance of *Aida* at the Met only to find that all the costumes have exploded shortly before opening night. You might go on stage naked but in my case the cast had exploded as well. I toyed with the idea of displaying the shattered remains and, since this was the blank-white-canvas era, it probably would have been a hit.

I took the bags back to the apartment and lined them up by the window. Each bag held about a month's work. I was twenty-five years old and utterly disheartened. I felt



like throwing the whole mess away and going back into horse racing but after considering my options I spread out all the shards and started to glue the pieces back together. Because I was so familiar with all the parts, this proved to be amazingly easy. The two largest pieces were

unsalvageable but I remade them; because I had done them before, it didn't take long and I was much happier with them than I had been with the originals. I intended to make the show date and I did.

We had a glitzy opening, a crowd came, they bought things, we drank champagne. I lost control for both Margaret and me and, in a flush of success, I rolled with her in the fresh fall of snow that had filled West Broadway, covering us completely in white until she had the good sense to roll us out of the way of a passing Checker Cab. Being smushed beneath a cab would have resulted in the complete destruction of the two major pieces in our larger show. I can still feel the chill wind as the cab narrowly missed running over us in the road. Take my advice and never, ever, cover yourself with snow at night and roll in a busy snow-filled street.

New York was great, but the distractions were everywhere so we moved to the country into the 200-year-old barn owned by a farmer I knew in Bridgewater, Connecticut. The farm had been in the family for so long that the farmer still had the original contract documenting his ancestor's purchase of the land from the Indians. I read the contract and was amazed to see that the Indians had turned over the place for two axe heads, ten nails and 24 copper coins, all duly signed on the dotted line with their X's. An authentic 17th century land swindle.

This is in a part of the world where the blood runs deep and blue. Vladimir Horowitz lived on our lane and we could hear him practicing the piano as we walked along the road. The producer Mike Nichols and the writer Elaine May lived on the other side. Once we ran into Warren Beatty and George C. Scott walking their dogs. The town of Bridgewater had so few people that even newcomers were drafted to pitch in for the Veterans Day parade during the Bicentennial hoopla. Although the population had skyrocketed since 1776 from 200 to 400 there still weren't enough old timers to run things, so I was enlisted to drive a farm tractor pulling a hay wagon on which many of the kids in the neighborhood would be riding. The parade was so small that nearly as many folks were in it as were watching. We stopped in front of the grandstand and some original members of The Daughters of the American Revolution read the list of fallen soldiers from the town. These were the Revolutionary War dead and one lady reminded everyone that General Benedict Arnold's horse was from Bridgewater, a little known fact.

At the end of the parade, I pulled onto the main road and had to drive about a half a mile to turn around. These tractors are painfully slow but this was a busy state highway so I ran it up to about 15 mph. The tractor made so much noise that coupled with the rattling of the metal tired wheels of the wagon I couldn't hear the screaming. Everything

went fine at 4 mph but the increased speed caused the wheels to shake with such a violent vibration that the loose hay began to feed into the wooden spokes and was ground to shreds. The half-dozen or so children were sliding along with it. Another six blocks and there would have been a much longer memorial list the following year.

After she moved in with me Margaret went looking for a job but visitor status was a problem, so I said why don't we just get married. It seemed to be the easy way out and we would be at least as successful as people who marry out of a singles bar. Margaret found a justice of the peace named Marty Gold, a retired New York City judge who now sold used books in Covered Bridge, Connecticut. It was midwinter (the exact day escapes me) and we were scheduled to stop by Marty's around ten in the morning. Margaret had baked a cherry pie (my favorite) for the wedding party, which consisted of the three of us and Marty's wife, who would serve as witness. She had an SPCA meeting so she told Marty to make it snappy. She kept her car running and didn't even wait for the pie. After the wedding, we went to get our '52 Ford truck registered. Connecticut required a vehicle safety



three minutes, including pie

check (so un-Californian) and even though this truck was in pretty good shape it did have a bullet hole through the windshield. Mercifully, it hadn't cracked so I filled the hole with fender putty and artistically painted a splattering of a faux seagull bomb on the offending area. During the inspection the inspector eyeballed the windshield and Margaret pushed her face right up in the window and he jumped back as their eyes met. It was our first con as husband and wife.

Margaret had a job in a hospital pathology department and also taught at the state college. We knew it was time for a break when she came home and told me that while she was eating lunch at her desk she

the inspection the inspec-

heard the doctor she worked for speaking into a tape machine next to her while examining an item in a tray... "I have here the patient's gangrenous right foot..." I was getting studio fever working by myself on microscopic sculptures day and night so we bought a 30-foot sailboat, took ten days off, promptly hit a rock, sank the boat and swam for shore. Hey, this is why they make life preservers, right?

Margaret still had nine days of vacation time left so we flew to Denver and hitchhiked to the opposite corner of the state, ending up in Telluride. Telluride was a tiny ski resort in those days and it was nearly a ghost town in the summer. We checked into a hotel and discovered we were the only inhabitants. There were a good many restaurants in town and we discovered that there was a price war going on, with Tequila Sunrises as the weapon of choice. We hung out in several of the restaurants and that's where I first mentioned to Margaret that it might be fun to run a restaurant. Back in Connecticut the body parts kept showing up on Margaret's desk and I was stone-bored in the studio so we decided it was a good time for a change. We had seen a picture of Stanford University in a magazine and I mentioned that I had been in a movie in the hills behind the campus. So we wrapped things up and moved into the picture. Over 25 years later, we still live in the picture.

We stayed in New York City for the July 4th 1976 harbor festivities. We were on a good-sized boat with about 100 people and a rock band. A rainstorm shorted out the band and we were nearly swamped by a wake by a monstrous Robber Baron's yacht. The next day we headed west. We planned to detour through Washington, D.C. to visit Margaret's parents. It might sound odd with them living so close to us but I had never met them. It had seemed like such a big deal to bring up the marriage bit, so Margaret had failed to mention it.

We raided an abandoned farm before we left Connecticut and found some superannuated farm stools and a table that had been kicking around the barnyard for a hundred years. We strapped these to the top of the van and with our Morris Minor in tow we must have looked so very like the Joads leaving the Dust Bowl. We pulled up to the in-laws' pristine mini-mansion in Chevy Chase. We got out and approached the house. Margaret's father, Colonel Frederick Reid III, was raised in India and The Colonel inherited the very English trait of a rigid upper lip stiffened against chaos. This expressed itself in the perfect circles of soil he made around the bases of his severely pruned fruit trees, forbidden, by some genetic incantation, to bear fruit. Our cats rocketed past us like invading Marines and proceeded to dig holes in the pristine rings, leaving a housewarming gift for Fred to deal with later.

We were all a little tense but Fred and I discovered common ground

for disagreement about the benefits of Parliament and Royalty. I was eager to hit the bricks, so on Saturday morning we waved so-long and I jammed our overloaded nightmare of a rig into gear, and hit the gas with conviction. The drive shaft snapped in half.

Take my advice and don't even bother combing junk yards for an Econoline drive shaft in the DC area on a steamy July weekend. We had the shaft welded on Monday and I pulled slowly away from the curb. We were on our way at last. We passed a mobile home park outside of Pittsburgh through which a tornado had made a precise run right through the VERY center. We stopped at The Grand Canyon of Pennsylvania. Skip it. It was pretty hot and it got hotter still.



"this ought to hold"

Not even halfway across the country, we had turned into dried apple dolls. The cats looked like Egyptian mummy cats. They signed a joint suicide pact somewhere around Ghoner, Nebraska and I caught one in midair just as he was going to exit through the sunroof while we were on the freeway. We had to put the lid on and that certainly made it a bit stuffy. In our delirium, we began to see strange sights. A yellow Morris Minor just like ours tried to pass us. It was curious to see another one with the same color and license plate... Hold on, it was ours! The tow bar must have melted and the Morris was just hooked by a flimsy chain. I can still hear the voice on the radio screaming "This is WJAX in Tuuuucomcary!" as the Morris smacked against the side of the truck.

We arrived at Needles, California on the day they set a record of 129 degrees F for the hottest place ever, in the western world (Libya holds the world's record of 134 degrees set in 1922). It was so hot that birds fell smoking from the sky and even the concrete roadway seemed to be getting soft. We camped at the mighty Colorado River, but so many people had been making Kool-Aid upstream that it was just a slick of steaming mud. The cats tried to make off with what was left of their miserable lives but we insisted that they stay and suffer along with us. It was this trip that gave me a lifelong love of air-conditioning. Today, I will drive nowhere with the windows down. I don't even need a car with opening windows. I read somewhere that due to the aerodynamic benefit of closed windows, cars will get better mileage, which more than compensates for the use of the air-conditioning. I know this

probably isn't true but I like the sound of it.

I've always ben fond the expression: "Conservation is just a crutch for people who can't handle air-conditioning."



Chapter 13.

"THEY LOOKED SO MUCH LIKE BANKS"

By the time I was halfway between birth and the present, I had learned several things:

1. Be exactly on time for everything. Be known for it.
2. People who count do not judge you by your hair.
3. If you think you are in the presence of greatness, you just might be. Therefore, you should always:
 - A. Carry a pen and write down the important things that people tell you. Do it right in front of them; it's actually flattering.
 - B. Carry a camera and don't hesitate to use it.



fashion tips for eisner



joan baez and
jumpin' jack flash



my best hollywood buddy,
heidi fleiss



fob



triplets



minister of silly walks

4. Ignore 'No Trespassing' signs in rural areas. The worst that will happen is you will be asked to leave or a bull might stomp on you. The reason they put those signs up is because that's where the good stuff is. In fact, ignore caution signs in general (except in Italy.)
5. Make fun of yourself. Who knows? It might be good for your career.

Jury Duty

I have always wanted to be on a jury. Did you know that you can't just go down and sign up to be on a jury? Bizarre, but true. Since you can't volunteer, you just go when called and cross your fingers that they'll pick you. I have been called five times and I quickly learned to curb my enthusiasm as it weirded out the folks in charge, who then dismissed me as being too strange. A few years ago I was called up and found myself on a Monday morning in a room that felt more like church than the county courthouse because all the prospective jurors were praying for freedom to about ten different gods. I guess they were being heard, because the entire assembly was dismissed after a couple of hours. Huzzas from all quarters, but not from me. I had endured just about ee-nough of these cavalier dismissals so I marched up to the clerk and announced that I was darn sick and tired of being sent out to pasture when I was perfectly able to sit with 11 retired electricians and badly dressed housewives in judgment of my fellow man.

The clerk was confused. I was free to go, didn't I get it? "No, no," I protested, "I'm trying to get *on* a jury." I had seen Henry Fonda change the minds of his fellows in *Twelve Angry Men*; I had read *Anatomy of a Jury*. I was not a (convicted) felon. I was a registered voter and a landowner. "Take me," I pleaded, throwing myself on the mercy of the court. The woman was suspicious but she took pity on me and said she could send me to another court in the same county where I might have better luck with my act.

So later that day I found myself in the basement beneath the Redwood City Superior Court awaiting the call for the next batch to go 'upstairs.' The phone rang and we were commanded to Courtroom 3 where we settled ourselves in for the *voir dire*, the process of jury selection. This is the room where people squirm in the witness box and confess to insanity, racism, poverty, my brother the cop. Some even jump up and come clean to crimes, both real and imagined. *And these are the jurors!*

I took one look at the defense attorney and my heart sank. Oh pickles, I'm cooked; I knew the guy. Nevertheless, I could still sit there and watch the process until they turfed me out. This wasn't a case of a joy rider jacking someone's Celica. This was a murder trial. Yikes! The defense attorney, Jeff Carr, is a noted murder lawyer and also a customer of mine. I knew his wife and kids. I knew his ex-wife. I had met his dog. I was never going to make it on this jury. The judge and the DA were going to bounce me like a BB off a boxcar as soon as I disclosed the connection.

Jeff is not your typical murder attorney. He looks normal enough from the front, but when he turns around you see that he has a surprising fall of hair reaching to his waist. What's up with that? He has

30 authentic inches of hair, as if he were a barrister in another century and hemisphere. Rock n’ roll or copyright law: maybe. But murder?

The judge immediately threw a scare into everyone. He leveled his finger like a pearl-handled revolver and told us that if we trucked out some lame excuse to shinny out of what was not just a right but a *requirement* of citizenship that he was prepared to hold us in contempt and a jury would be chosen for us. He lightened up just a bit when the ex-wife of the actor Richard Attenborough (the old codger from *Jurassic Park*) was impaneled. (“Hey, Judge, my aunt knew Roy Rogers!”)

Two and a half days later, they still needed two more jurors. There were only four of us left, floating in the pool like a few cigarette butts after a frat party. Jeff was riveting. Several times he turned and drew a splayed hand through his long ponytail, then leaned forward, looking deep into a juror’s eyes and asked, “I have long hair. Do you have a problem with that?” Of course no one took that bait because the judge might have dismissed them from the jury and then racked them up on charges of bigotry or something. Finally it was my turn to be interrogated. The judge asked me if I could stand tall and true and, even though I knew I could, I had to disclose that I had practically slept with the defense counsel. The judge questioned me as to how well I knew Jeff and I soft-soaped the relationship as a nodding one. We had only spoken about capital crimes a few times and, heck, I barely knew the eating habits of his dog. The DA probed as to whether we had ever been fishing together or borrowed each other’s socks, belts or ties; if we hadn’t, I was OK with him. Amazingly, the judge concurred. Well, golly-be! But before I could leap into the air and yell, “Halle-damn-lujah judge, you will never regret this!” Jeff spoke up. “I wish to excuse this juror,” he said. What? Come again? An essential pillar of this process is to have friends and acquaintances on the jury because a conviction must be 12 to zero in a capital crime, and this defendant stood accused of selling someone a full-time dirt nap.

I consider myself to be intelligent, impartial, and available but the defense attorney used one of his preemptive dismissals for which no cause has to be stated. I was not so much disappointed as mystified as to why he would dismiss me, but I would not have long to wonder. That night Jeff came into the restaurant and told me what had happened. This is a man who has defended dozens of accused murderers. He has won most, but not all of the cases he has tried. An attorney is charged with mounting the best defense for a client and in our society, guilt or innocence is a matter of what the jury decides.

Jeff told me that he had dismissed me because the young man on trial was innocent. The kid, just 20 or so, had been set up. Jeff felt that if I had been on the jury, and had found his client guilty, that he would feel awkward about ever coming into my restaurant

again. He valued Buck’s, as well as me, and that was why he dismissed me. The trial went on for several weeks, which meant that I would have had to cancel a trip to Australia had I been on the jury. When I returned, I got a call from Jeff who told me that in the final hours of the trial there had been an unanticipated jailhouse confession by another prisoner, thereby exonerating his client. The next night, Jeff, his client and the kid’s whole family came to have a celebration dinner at Buck’s. That was a surprise: I had figured that the kid was guilty for sure.

So far I’ve been unsuccessful in my quest to be impaneled on a jury, but looking at the defendant in the box reminded me how I have tiptoed around being that very guy while some of those around me went away to Danbury Federal Prison to work on their backhands for a few years. Some people say that OJ was guilty but he was not guilty in the legal sense. A jury found him innocent, and even if he did kill his wife, he was found not guilty. If you are found guilty and don’t like it, you can continue to fight through the appeals process. If you are found innocent, you are released and can get on with your life. This simple fact is one of the great strengths of our society and it is the jury system that protects this right. Some bad people go free but if there is a better system I haven’t seen it.

TERM SAVINGS ACCOUNT WITH

Palos Verdes Estates Br.
BRANCH

SECURITY FIRST NATIONAL BANK

Jamie Benefield

56034

NO.

This account is not subject to check

DATE	ENTERED BY	WITHDRAWN	DEPOSITED	BALANCE
FEB 23 '62	MB		2 -	2 -
MAR 9	MB		3 -	5 -
APR 16 '62	MB		8.75	13.75
JUN - 1 '62	MB	5 -		8.75
Mar. 31, 1962 Interest			02	8.77
1.30.62	MB		09	8.86
JUN 27 '62	MB	3.40		5.46
AUG 2 1962	MB	1.25		4.21
AUG 2 1962	MB	21		4 -
AUG - 8 1962	MB	2 -		2 -
AUG 8 - '62	MB	2		0

early stab at personal banking

of the characters who had been on the inside of the first great S & L collapse of the '80s, Lincoln Savings, moved a few miles down the road and started the game again. Money rolled out the door like so many donuts.

Let me dress the stage. And stage sets they certainly were. I was one of three general contractors who were hired to build one each of these branches in six weeks. If we finished everything on time we would

In the mid '80s, the Great Savings and Loan Collapse rocked the industry to its foundations. Through a bit of clever manipulation of the lending regulations, rivers of money gushed forth and I was smack in the middle of an immense shell game.

It started like this: I had a contracting firm and landed a job building a small thrift. A thrift was sort of a legal, money laundering operation in reverse. In short, they brought in clean money and sent it out dirty. Some

get a 10 percent bonus. This seemed like a pretty good deal to me. If you have ever built anything, you realize how hard it is to bring all of the elements together and finish absolutely everything on time. We had a walk-through with the architects and the owner's rep the day before the deadline, and had only a few minor things left to do so I felt confident that we would make it. The principal feature of the branch was a massive wood wall made of mahogany, featuring a garish brass sign emblazoned with the name "Western Community Money Center." Throw in a \$15,000 lighting system and the effect was a dazzling, in-your-face billboard.

"Y'all come on down, now, 'cuz we have a monster sale on MONEY." Yippee! Money as a commodity; what a concept.

The sign was terrific and it really grabbed you by the eyeballs as you entered. But when we glued the plywood panels together, an unwelcome pucker rose up from the wood veneer, despite all our efforts to lay it down. Instead of flattening out like a nice pucker should, it kept sucking up glue and swelling bigger and bigger, exactly at eye level next to the giant letter M in the word Money. We were running out of time and ideas and the white gloves were due in an hour. This 1-inch long lump in the veneer was worth \$8,000 of early '80s money, which is the equivalent of half a zillion dollars today.

What we decided to do was to cut away a little bit of the veneer, inject superglue into the cavity and have the job superintendent hold the patch down with his finger. We got it done just as the inspectors showed up. They looked around approvingly but I glanced over at the superintendent and he had a weird twisted smile on his face, a scary blend of hysteria and dread. He was leaning against the wall with one hand and casually dusting the sign with a handkerchief. His index finger was glued tight to the wall. He may be there still.

We had met our deadline while the other two contractors missed by a country mile, so we were signed up to build all the branches and the corporate facilities as well. As I said, this was a money manufacturing facility and the management wanted to sprint for the gold. They laid out the grand scheme over cognac and cee-gars to those of us who were insiders (read co-conspirators). The architects would design the handsome branches, my talented craftsmen would lovingly build the interiors, and the furniture guy would make the desks and conference room tables. Then the financial team would set about to skin the customers. The idea was to build glamorous branches and lure savings deposits, then lend the money at usurious rates and keep the point spread. The more money you flipped, the more money you made.

Everyone seemed to be a winner. Especially me, who was

consistently paid 10 percent extra for finishing on time. I built 18 branches on time. Budget, smudget, they cost what they cost, plus mark-up, plus profit, plus 10 percent. We were working night and day and my firm prospered along with theirs. With all this haste, problems inevitably arose, such as the time we laid gigantic green marble slabs in the lobby of the corporate headquarters and they rolled right up like potato chips an hour later. I had always thought of marble sort of like, well...stone. Nice and flat. But the marble guy said, "Oh, this happens sometimes." "Like now, you mean?" I said. We had to pull it all out and saw it up, then relay it and grind it flat. But this was nothing compared to the state regulators, who, like the vigilantes of that same name from the Old West, wanted to have things their way. We would soon learn that they were getting ready to saddle up and ride.

On another occasion, the president of the corporation told me to rip out the entire phone system and throw hundreds of phones in a pile in the parking lot, then call the phone provider to come and shovel them up. Although I admired the management's braggadocio, I had to refuse some assignments. One of the officers told me to cut down a rather large, city-owned tree, which the city fathers had the bad taste to let grow for many years in front of the future home of The Western Community Money Center. I explained that cutting down a 40-foot tree (which we had petitioned to have removed but failed) just might make the wrong people mad and I was the one on site so who did they think would be blamed? Sometime over a weekend the tree disappeared, and when the cops showed up they cleverly inspected my hands for sap.

"No sap on these hands, copper!"

We built one branch in the notorious Castro District of San Francisco. Gay people need money too and we were building an unprejudiced money machine so we earnestly set to construct a nightmare of nuevo-retro-baroque marble and polished brass. The design looked as if it had come from an unmedicated architect fixated on seeing his bad dreams become real. We installed faux Roman columns that had been snapped off in the middle and even a few gargoyles. One neighborhood wag called the design Baroko-Rococo. We didn't care how stupid it looked. For the kind of money they were paying us, we would have built a public gallows for the Easter Bunny.

The branch manager was Nick Rubicam, son of the famous ad man of Young and Rubicam. His office was just upstairs from the Castro Street site and he used to drop by every day without fail to check on the construction of his branch. Then one day he failed to show up. He had been there like a clock hand at the same time every day and had said the previous day that he would see me tomorrow. I figured something had

come up and he had unexpectedly left town. The police were not so sanguine and, as the days passed, the cops interviewed all of us as they investigated his disappearance. His body was found a few days later in Golden Gate Park. The murder was never solved.

Then those pesky regulators rode into town. It seems that if you commingle the activities of a thrift with a saving and loan, they consider it some sort of violation. A crime, even. Can you imagine? When they came to the corporate headquarters they discovered the thrift and the S & L (which were supposed to be two different companies but in practice were acting as one) in the same room. They insisted that we knock it off immediately. They were somewhat vague as to the details, so the brass told me to put up a glass partition wall with two doors so they could pass back and forth. When the regulators came back in a few days they made me lock the doors so that employees had to go outside and climb over a mound of telephones in the parking lot to enter the other side. And still, the regulators were not at all happy with this solution. "Will nothing satisfy these people?" we kvetched.

They finally made the savings people actually move across the street, and I had to build new facilities for them and take my 10, 10 and 10 once again. Oh, boo-hoo. It was about this time that the ire of the government coincided with the shiftiness of the management, and even down in the trenches we started to get nervous. Nevertheless, we kept at it like gold-crazed miners extracting the last shred of value from a creaking mine in immediate danger of collapse. I was roving from Monterey to Sacramento installing one theatrical facade after another, as determined as a Vegas hooker at a plumbing convention.

I wasn't the only one running flat out to keep up with the growth, but some couldn't cut it and were ground beneath the wheels of commerce, or in this case, banking. Hey, it happens. The architect had visions of immortality but it takes more than an insufferable ego to be the next Frank Lloyd Wright. He thought that it would be just the thing if we switched from rare and endangered Honduras Mahogany to the nearly extinct Bubinga, a tree so rare even then that it failed to make the endangered list. The Japanese Kodo Drummers made their ancient drums out of this wood and we were lining the employee bathrooms with it. To maintain an uninterrupted supply, we bought the only log of Bubinga in the Western world from a veneer company in Chicago and I supervised the manufacture of special plywood. We then installed these sheets, all carefully numbered and matched, laid up in impossibly seamless walls 30 feet wide. The wood finish consisted of black stain, red dye and a catalyzed polyurethane so difficult to spray uniformly that we finally substituted lacquer. Spraying catalyzed polyurethane is like spraying

superglue and sticking everyone's finger to it. Not a good idea. The furniture guy did use it though, on hundreds of desks, tables, and credenzas. After a few months, his finish began to turn from a satiny hand-rubbed luster to cataract-like milky white. It was determined that *the furniture was going to be a total loss*. We had just finished a run of four branches that were scheduled to open in a few days with phones on the desks and little plastic dividers all labeled in the files (marked "Money," "More Money" and "Even More Money"). The furniture man and all of his employees, family, and house plants were scheduled to be shot at dawn.

I had been adding staff and building more branches and swilling cognac and heading for the big time. Then Black and Blue Monday arrived. We were slated to begin a grand new corporate headquarters, complete with waterfalls and the whole business, so we showed up to gut a three-story building and dig in early when we found the facility had literally been chained shut by U.S. Marshals. "Excuse me, officer, we're manufacturing money here; just what do you think you're doing?"

The TV news that night showed a little old lady shaking the door pulls, which had been secured by heavy medieval looking chains. Turning to the camera, she said in a creaky voice, "They looked so much like banks." Well, that would be my fault, I guess. The amazing thing was that at no time was there ever any money in any of these places. We never installed ATMs or vaults. I had never figured that part out and the little old lady whining about her life savings couldn't figure it out either. The furniture guy was pretty relieved, however. Everyone in management was running for cover, but I was left with 40,000 square feet of Bubinga, which had been sawed to 3/42nds thickness in foot-wide veneers. It was too thin for firewood and too wide for toothpicks. I also had about an acre of Irish linen, all backed for hanging on the walls, and literally tons of green marble.

Worse yet, I was owed a lot of do-re-me. The regulators had failed to uncover all the assets over the weekend so I went to one of the offices that had escaped their notice and found people still there, milling around in confusion. I made the most of this opportunity to squeeze a friendly face. I'll never know how it was possible, but I extracted a check for the bulk of what I was owed and managed to get it cleared through my bank in a few hours.

Since we were the first house of cards to fall, we actually predated the much bigger crash a couple of years later and the State of California (otherwise known as the taxpayer—bless your cotton, rice and bean pickin' souls), bailed out the depositors beyond their insured levels, so the little old lady got her money back and the furniture guy got to keep

his house plants. The branches I had so lovingly built were re-purposed as waterbed stores and yogurt shops. The Castro Branch was reincarnated as an adult novelty store, and the interior is still there today. Even if I didn't end up with all the money I was owed, I have this really neat house made out of Irish Linen, Bubinga and green marble.

Making Money the Old Fashioned Way

Until recently, I failed to see the irony in the next job I got. The gig was to renovate the offices of Thomson Lithograph. I built a really exotic avant garde interior, which I richly appointed in (you guessed it), Irish linen, marble and a certain rare African wood. Perhaps it was too flashy, because a few years later the cops got them too, this time for *literally* manufacturing money. In 1987 they became the largest counterfeiters in California history.

Thomson was a nice man. He had taken over this venerable firm from his father and worked hard to make his printing plant the most modern facility on the West Coast. He sold the business to his key employees and it continued to flourish. But instead of printing annual reports and pornography like most other printers, they turned out some pretty fine twenty-dollar bills.

Thomson had been gone for a couple of years but his name was still on the building. That had to have stung. He learned a valuable lesson, though: If you sell your business to mobsters, scrape your name off the marquee before you leave.

It seemed like there were police running all around me scooping up my clients, so I sought refuge in rock n' roll. The Hard Rock Cafe was started by a couple of Americans in London and it was a Plain Jane burger joint but it, well, rocked. The concept was to nail so many guitars to the walls that people wouldn't notice the crummy food. Hey, brilliant idea! Today, the Hard Rock is an empire run by the dark emperor himself, Peter Morton. One weekend he had a crew put a 1959 Cadillac through the roof of his first West Coast unit in Beverly Hills. On Monday, the owners of the Beverly Center sent him an angry letter demanding that he take it down. Morton framed the letter, hung it in his office and ignored them. The car is still sticking through the roof.

I went to LA to hang out with Morton and discuss building a Hard Rock in San Francisco. At the time this was a big deal; it was the precursor to the *eat*-ertainment craze with its myriad imitators featuring supermodels, stuffed jungle animals, and movie stars. These restaurants were heated with huge bonfires of cash where investors could stand

around and warm their hands as their money went up in smoke. We started the construction on Van Ness in the early '80s, and even though the basic interior was planned out beforehand, the decoration was design-as-you-go. The work kept piling up, even if the schedule didn't expand along with it. My company was responsible for building the inside of a large building the exterior of which was being renovated by another contractor.

This project was another slice of insanity, something I was quickly becoming accustomed to. Morton insisted that I maintain a sign on the outside of the building telling everyone that the Hard Rock was coming. Fair enough, but people kept stealing the sign. I even painted the message on the side of the building and someone cut that part of the wall off and hauled it away. We eventually had to hire a guard but we caught him stealing all sorts of things, including the next sign.

One project was to find a 1960 Cadillac and have it sawed lengthwise down the center and carefully plaster it into the wall so it looked natural. We had to use highly trained union riggers, who cost a fortune. They dropped the car almost immediately and the perfect, candy-apple, paint job had to be redone on-site to the tune of another ten grand. Morton's demands became increasingly unrealistic. A couple of weeks before opening he decided that the back bar should be lowered.

The bartender would look too tall, he reasoned. "Just lower it," he said. This was a 30-foot back bar with an

immense glass shelving system glued in place atop a tiled concrete island, with all the relevant plumbing and wiring. My superintendent just laughed at Morton, but I said I'd do it, so I had jackhammers running into the night until the cops shut us down. Then we switched to sledge hammers and worked 48 straight hours until the relocation was complete. I was running on adrenalin and the blind faith that I would be paid for all my extra effort.

Occasionally, the monotony of hanging airplanes and motorcycles was broken up by something more interesting. When a robber pulled a gun at the Hibernia Bank across the street from the job (the same one made famous by Patty Hearst when she robbed it), one of my carpenters just happened to be in line to cash a check and he jumped on the guy and wrestled the gun away from him. It was a loaded .44



my other car is the right half

(known in the trade as a 'street-sweeper'). We all agreed it was one damn big gun to rob a bank with.

The union strike posed yet another problem. It seems that the glazers were walking out because they had failed to settle a new contract. The building wasn't going to get any windows, thereby delaying our project for weeks. It being summertime, most of the union officials were at their homes in the Caribbean or the south of France. "Fix it," Morton commanded.

"Yoo-hoo, Peter, not my job." It wasn't part of my contract but I tried anyway. His attorney and I managed to track down the only union boss left in San Francisco: Joe Mazola, the notorious capo of the plumbers union. Back then, San Francisco was a tough-as-nails union holdout in the old style. Someone owed someone a favor and we managed to take a sit down with Joe.

Now I was an old union man from back in my bomb-manufacturing days and I spoke the language. It goes something like this: "Please sir, don't kill me." It was kind of fun dealing with these guys. They might not have been mobsters but they sure looked it. We were getting used to that look because Peter Morton's father, Arnie Morton, was an old time Chicago guy of Morton's Steakhouse fame and he was not the kind of guy you pushed around. I could see the father in the son.

We asked Joe if he would call the glazing guy and tell him that our glazer would agree to any terms that would keep the project on schedule. From his island retreat, the union glazing steward turned this offer down flat. Finally, the strike ended without our help, but left precious little time for the building shell contractor to install the mullions, measure for the oversized glass and have it shipped from St. Louis to be installed by opening day.

The long awaited glass finally arrived packed in two mammoth crates, each weighing a couple of tons. The architects, the lawyers, Morton and I were all inside for a strategy meeting to make sure the loose ends of this very complicated job were tied up. During the meeting, I heard a commotion. When I went outside, I saw that one of the crates had fallen over and hit the other crate, sending both crashing to the ground. It must have been the same riggers who had so ably assisted with the Cadillac! An ambulance was already en route to haul away a glazer who had his leg smashed, along with every last sheet of glass. I just shook my head and went back inside, wondering who would be the lucky guy to break the news. Morton would certainly shatter when he found out, and we would all be caught in the shrapnel. The glass was in no way my responsibility, but I was sure that this fact wouldn't save me.

As he wrapped up the meeting, Morton asked each of us if we could foresee anything that would hold up the opening. He had paid Cyndi Lauper a pile of non-refundable money to show up; the invitations had been mailed out to about a thousand people and he intended to open on time or... "Well," I said in a small voice, "All the windows just broke. Could be a problem." This was the glass we had all begged, threatened and eventually prayed for, week in week out and here we were eight days from opening and I was making a little joke. Peter looked like he was going to squash me. "Not funny," he said through clenched teeth. I cringed at the thought of all those messengers of yore whose heads made the return trip on the end of a sharpened stick.

We all went out to the sidewalk and the other contractor told him the game was up. "Forget the opening," he said.

Morton turned to me as if the news had been no more significant than a parking ticket and said "Fix it." He got in his limo and drove away. I raised a finger at his retreating figure but then I thought, OK, I'll give it a try.

I got on the phone and found a glass fabricator in Richmond on the other side of the Bay who told me that if I could get them the sizes in 2 hours and bring a check for double the regular price that same afternoon, they would cut the glass and temper it over the weekend. "And, oh," he added, "bring \$10,000 in cash as well." Done and done. Paperwork be damned.

On opening day, I had a couple hundred thousand dollars in change orders for Morton to sign and he was all of a sudden unavailable. He had decided that I was trying to steal from him because I didn't have receipts for all the midnight work and the cash I had been spending to make everything happen. I finally cornered him. He said he wasn't going to sign or pay anything at the moment, and I could basically go screw myself.

He felt he was done with me but he missed one thing. He needed a special power hookup of about a million volts to power the band and the stage lighting. A showdown was at hand. If he didn't pay me what he owed me I would be bankrupt, but if I didn't let the electrician hook him up Morton might never pay me anything. Bypassing me, Morton told the electrician to hook up the power. The electrician (an authentic hero) told Morton that he worked for me. Remember, this was a union town, and no one else would make the electrical connection. We all stood and stared at each other but I blinked first. I was out gunned and I knew it. I had no choice but to cooperate.

We powered up and the party took off. Actually, there were two parties. The "A List" people got to go downstairs where the restaurant

and the band was. The "B List" was in the parking garage upstairs. The people upstairs had no idea they had been B-listed until they realized that they were in a parking lot with a big video screen watching the real party take place below them. When the B-listers figured out what was happening, they flooded down the stairs, overcoming the guards. John DeLorean, with Morgan Fairchild in tow, spearheaded the attack. This was the B List? I was too angry to appreciate the nonsense.

Eventually I was paid most of what I was owed, but I vowed that I would never work for difficult people again. I would only work for friends and I did. There is an old adage that you should never work for friends but the fact is that friends treat you much better than strangers. That's why they are called friends.

I drove by the site on Van Ness the other day and the Hard Rock was completely gone. Awww, too bad.



Chapter 14.

CARS ARE A GUY THING

Cars are a guy thing and puppies are a girl thing. *Ouch!* I can hear your stinging denunciation, but even though it is possible for a really, really fat person to win the Olympic Gold Medal in the high hurdles on some planets, on *this* planet cars are a guy thing.

Back when Johnson (Lyndon, not Andrew) was President, a Cushman motor scooter kick-started my life on wheels. The term ‘scooter’ might conjure up thoughts of good looking college students riding Vespas on some sun-soaked Greek isle, their hair blowing in the breeze, as thoughts of rattan-wrapped jugs of retsina and sex sparkle in their eyes. In reality, the Cushman weighed about 390 lbs and looked (and sounded) like a oversized lawnmower with its sneaky little tires and feminine powder blue paint job. I sped along perilously at 32 mph as the engine wheezed unconvincingly between my thighs. The most backward farm boy 50 miles from the nearest traffic light wouldn’t be caught dead on this thing, not that you could have died from anything but shame on this monstrous pipsqueak. This vehicle was responsible for me remaining a virgin for far longer than was decent. It was Walter’s idea. He had had a Cushman when he was a kid and thought that it would serve me well, as it had him. “Hey, Wally, that was in 1937!” I might as well have had my forehead tattooed with the word **DORK**. Keep in mind that Walter was a man who thought Detroit’s finest hour was the persistently flammable Corvair. I realize now that people had to be laughing at me but through all the noise and the cloud of smoke I couldn’t tell.

As soon as I could, I upgraded to a small mail truck, which was actually a three-wheeled scooter with a little building attached to it. I drove it home and was shocked, shocked and dismayed, to discover the Cushman logo concealed beneath the USPS sticker. I carefully lettered the word Chumash over the old logo and claimed that it was made by the California Indians made famous by Ishi. Fitting, I thought, because Ishi was the last of his tribe. The Chumash were squashed by a more powerful tribe, the Californians.

Cushman is still in the business of making golf carts, and that brings us to my friend Eric Brandenburg, who built a golf course in San Jose. In this era we have a respect for the long dead Indians that we somehow never managed while they were alive. If you dig a hole and find Indian bones on a construction site, you have to stop work and call

the anthropologists and shamans to sort everything out. You might ask what there is to sort out, since they 'left the building' some five or ten thousand years ago. Good question. While Eric's crew was excavating, they kept unearthing far more skeletons than ever before for a given area and it wasn't even a cemetery. Every time they encountered a skeleton it cost another 10 grand or so in lost time and professional fees.

Eventually they dug up over a hundred skeletons. It looked like some ancient, mass parachute jump gone very wrong. This area is called the Cinnabar Hills. Cinnabar is the ore from which mercury is extracted. It was determined that the Indians had been keeling over in droves due to the plants and fish poisoning them. In this bizarre twist of events, the benign Garden of Eden setting was highly toxic.

After the bones were reverently collected, the anthropologists and Indian representatives dug a big hole with a backhoe and reburied them in an unmarked grave. Today the Cushman golf carts glide quietly over these same skeletons.

In Europe they have been burying people for so long that, unless you are Debussy or one of them, they just keep burying new corpses on top of the old ones and stacking the tombstones so tightly together that in some cemeteries there is absolutely no place left to dig a hole. In Paris, they used to pile the local citizens in a building that eventually held about half a million bodies. Finally the pressure became too much for the walls and the building burst, spilling bones in all directions.



When my last Cushman was hauled to the dump I moved up to a 1930 Model A Ford, an infuriating machine way past its prime. People love to say, "They don't make 'em like that anymore." Good thing. It actually had a factory-made gas gauge that consisted of a wine cork fitted to the end of a wire. This ran to a dial in a sight glass on the dashboard. As the gas tank filled, you could see the level rise behind the glass, because the tank was in front of the cab, right between the engine and your knees. Combine this with compulsively unreliable mechanical brakes (which required real planning to bring the car to a halt) and you had the formula for a nifty fireball if you had the bad judgment to hit a tree.

Next I bought a dune buggy for \$50. I had it for only a week when I managed to get a three-page fix-it ticket. My crimes included no fenders, no signals, no bumpers (who would imagine that this could be considered a violation?), no license plates (where would I have put them?), a leaking gas tank, no seat belts, no headlights and no lots of

other stuff. This vehicle wasn't really fixable as it had never been completed but it had a T-bird engine and was so powerful that when I stepped on it hard the tires would spin in place. I let it rip in the high school parking lot and for a half a second people thought that I might actually be cool but then it erupted into a supernova of flaming rubber. I jumped clear just as the leaky gas tank sent the whole thing up like a Barbary Coast honky-tonk. I'll bet there is still a serious burn mark in that parking lot. Some kids would get in trouble at home for this sort of thing; not me.



"hop in, babe"

A year after Walter wandered away, my mother started dating some slickster from L.A. She was at home less and less after that, until one day she called and asked if I would mind if she got married and moved to Venice, (not the real Venice, the crummy one) with Emmanuel Lombard. I said that it was OK with me, but would she still be paying the bills? I was certain that I couldn't pay the rent delivering papers. She said sure, sure and that I was a good sport. So she moved out. Then there was just me and the cat...and he didn't look too stable.

Lombard was a good-looking guy and had been in a couple of Hollywood movies. I had the good fortune to see one of these screamers, which he wrote, directed and starred in. It worked well enough as a comedy even if it wasn't billed as one. In 1940, I'm sure the pencil-thin mustache looked quite dashing but in 1966 it looked like a small shaving error. His cultured glint seemed to me no more than a bad uncle's leer. Lombard claimed to be descended from Sardinian nobles, but I don't recall that a lot of Sardinian princes came through Ellis Island. I didn't fully approve of this character but he did have a certain flair, and I was more than a little impressed when he followed my lead and bought the same kind of car I had.



coleman in
lost horizon

By the time I was a senior I had wised right up to cars and bought myself something practical, a 1952 Cadillac hearse that had been cut into a drag racer. It looked mean enough and



lombard in restaurant

it would chew the streets in a straight line but it was hell on curves. I once took a turn at high speed and slid across the length of the polished red leather bench seat to the passenger side, as there were no seat belts. I barely made it back to the driver's seat in time to regain control. And it was hard to



the love hotel

pick up a date in this car because when I showed up at a girl's house the mother would invariably think what I was thinking. I only had it for six months when it blew a crank shaft which is, to a car like this, a fatal heart attack. I'm still mourning.

I went to high school with the son of Parnelli Jones, the famous racer. This kid drove to school in cars plastered with racing numbers and sponsorship stickers. These cars had massive engines, which delivered deep, bestial rumbles that to teenage boys sounded like the challenge of an alpha bull elephant. Another kid at school was the son of the producer of the James Bond movies. His great grandfather invented broccoli. I'm not kidding; the family is named Broccoli. You can look it up. The kid once drove up in the Aston Martin DB4 driven by James Bond in *Goldfinger*. I can't recall the kid at all but I sure do remember the car.

All the guys I knew worked on cars back then but modern cars are far too complicated for kids to work on today, so the greasy intimacy between car and boy is long gone. Cars are more complex today than the Apollo project was then and that's not an exaggeration. Cars incessantly fell apart from the inside and got pretty smacked around on their outsides, so you needed at least 2 or 3 every year to keep rolling. When my Cad blew up, Lombard loaned me his stock '51 Cadillac hearse, complete with velvet curtains and metal signs announcing 'Funeral in Progress,' which were mounted in the rear windows. I thought the guy was strange back then, what with him going on about the benefits of wheat germ and his hip insider lingo. I'll bet that we would get along great today.

Lombard was a high school teacher at Beverly Hills High long before anyone knew the zip code. Beverly Hills High stands out in my mind for one thing in particular: they have a basketball court that separates in the middle and rolls away to reveal a competition sized swimming pool. Hmmm...you know, it isn't far from where they shot the scene from *Ten Commandments* with the sea opening up and Chuck Heston taking the tribes home. This is the Swimgym seen in the movie *It's a*

Wonderful Life. You might think that some taxpayers would object to such extravagance but no, it was paid for by the oil wells on campus that have been producing for generations.

In the end, Lombard proved to be too smooth to stick with my mother for long. One day he brought home black satin sheets, claiming that they would be more sensual than mere cotton. Fair enough. He then thought that he could get in closer touch with the sheets if he shaved his body. Sardinians are pretty hairy, I guess, and he shaved off everything except the moustache. He looked a lot like a hairless chimpanzee. I can only imagine what sort of attention he got at the high school. The problem with all this sensuality was that it was hard to actually stay in the bed. At some point he slithered out onto the floor and smacked his polished Sardinian backside so hard that he wrenched his spine and needed to be hospitalized. My mother's husbands generally leave by ambulance. He made the car a parting gift to me and I eventually traded it to a rock n' roll drummer for a Morris Minor convertible and a Fender guitar.

The Morris turned out to have no first or reverse gears, but the car was so light that if I parked carefully I could push it by hand the few times I needed to go in reverse. After that I lived in a VW bus during a brief stint at L.A. State College. I had been living at the foot of the San Gabriel Mountains next to the happy hunting grounds of Pitzer, an all-women's college. One night I was watching TV in the common room, and saw rioting students overturning ROTC vehicles and setting them on fire at UC Berkeley. I was pretty good at lighting vehicle fires, so I pumped up my grades and transferred to Berkeley. In the fall of 1969 I found myself right on deck for the next wave of riots.

At Berkeley I drove a Morris Traveler, which was a small station wagon with wooden sides. Mine still had the English flapper turn signals, which swung out from the body with a little light at the end. The Traveler made me look like a SNAG (Sensitive New Age Guy) and though I might have been sensitive, I might have just been cheap. Since ancient times, guys have used cars to attract the opposite sex. The fact is that most women only pretend to be impressed by fancy cars, but the Morris Traveler attracted more women than any Ferrari Testarossa ever could.



Juliette was my first girlfriend at Berkeley. She had waist-length blond hair. Here's a tip for the guys out there: make sure you date a woman with really long hair at least once in your life. Juliette had a

brand new blood-red Jaguar XKE convertible, which was at once so not hippy as it was so very hip. We had to run around to the student protests in the Morris but when we went to the beach we took the Jag. This was the only car I had ever seen with a telephone in it. Keep in mind that this was 1969 and even the Beatles didn't have a car phone. The phone unit weighed about 25 lbs and was actually a marine ship-to-shore system. There was a network back then, which was essentially a two-way radio and it worked in some places where cell phones still don't today. The calls cost some unknown bazillions of dollars but we didn't care. Daddy paid.

In fact, Daddy paid for everything except my tuition, and this was *her* Daddy. Juliette was a sweet kid, if a bit lightly tethered to Planet Earth. At Berkeley we ran in the streets, marched on City Hall (as if the City of Berkeley could stop the war in Vietnam), tossed a few rocks through the windows of 'the man' and even occupied the Dean's office. Once, I painted Juliette's face, and she was caught on camera; her picture ran on page one of the *L.A. Times*.

Daddy was not pleased to see his little girl in the paper like this. It seems that he was a rather traditional fellow who owned a ranch in Southern California about the size of Belgium. Right in the middle of the ranch was his cash cow: a slaughterhouse, or 'the facility' as he called it. Now Daddy was concerned about his Communist daughter and he recalled her to the homestead to have her up on charges. She asked me to come along. I think she did this with some ill-considered notion that bringing a long haired radical boyfriend would divert the heat lamps from her. It didn't work like that; her father just turned on more lights.

We drove down in her car and pulled up to a ranch right out of a Faulkner novel, if Faulkner had written about Riverside County. When we pulled into the driveway Daddy's pal, the local sheriff, was just leaving in his big black Cadillac. The sheriff was so huge that minutes before, he had leaned back too hard and snapped the seat back off. When we showed up, they were using bales of hay to keep the driver's seat upright so that the sheriff could drive home. I knew better than to laugh, since I had just come from a town where the sheriffs were shooting people.

At about 8 feet tall, Daddy was pretty scary and he looked at me like he planned to cover me with honey and drop me in an ant farm. After the sheriff took off Daddy took me inside to show me his gun



juliette

collection, as well as a large population of the dismembered heads of deceased fauna of the West, while Juliette went to change into her farm duds. She came back in an outfit that so unnerved me that I momentarily considered stealing her car and making a run for it. She had changed into what I thought was a Marie Antoinette milkmaid costume but then it hit me: the hair. She was dressed like Cinderella at the ball!

Lunch was served by a large friendly Mexican woman who addressed me as “Sir.” To say that lunch was meat-based would merely be saving the hyperbole for later. After lunch, Juliette had to re-inventory her dolls or something so Daddy took me on a tour of ‘the facility.’ If I had been a Catholic I would have been crossing myself. I doubted if anyone would ever recognize me chopped and stamped **US BERKELEY PRIME**. And imagine this: Daddy was Jewish. I had figured him for Southern Baptist, but never Jewish. I think he was less than strictly observant; I wasn’t familiar with kosher slaughterhouses, but I seriously doubt if this was one.

I’ve never been squeamish, but if you are, don’t even try to visualize what goes on in one of these places. It’s bloody; there’s a certain amount of screaming; there are large knives swinging in all directions. “Gee, Daddy, thanks. That was swell. What say we go on over to the federal prison and watch the lifers walk around the exercise yard before dinner?”

By the time we returned to the house, Juliette had blinked back from her reverie, changed into her bell-bottoms and was enthusiastically arguing with her mother. She was as mad as a cat in a Cuisinart, and she grabbed me and pulled me outside. We jumped into a jeep and sped out of the yard and across the prairie, where she vented her anger by honking the horn at the steers and working the bovines into a frenzy. Nothing drives a cattleman crazier than running the fat off his herd. I had never seen a woman raise her fist and shake it at the heavens except in the movies.

Dinner was meat based once again. I have read that the Seventh Day Adventists are vegetarians but they still like the texture, shape and taste of meat, so they have their own line of vegetable-based mock-meat products, such as chicken legs and standing rib roasts made of carrots and soybeans. Well, this family seemed to be fashioning vegetables out of meat to go with the meat. At the table, Mom presented me with a gift. Even though I had a fairly ghoulish streak, I was just a bit dismayed by the delivery, with the lemon chiffon pie, of two nifty calf fetuses in plastic bags. All I had to do, Mom told me, was to locate some five-gallon jars and a tub of formaldehyde and I would have a nice display for my room at college. A lot of good that would do me. There was only one girl in the world who would find jars of dead

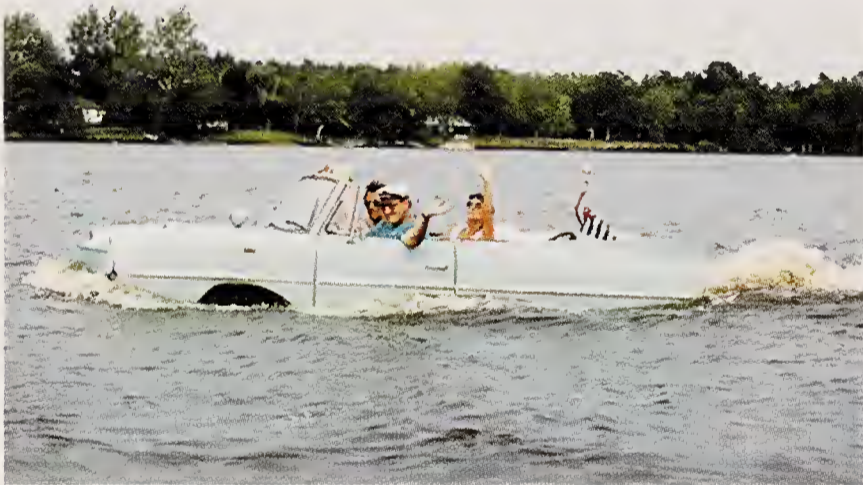
cows a turn-on and I was already going out with her.

Today I would probably be more polite and pinch my lips into an appreciative “ooh” and “ahh” over the nice gift but I was less thoughtful back then. I told Mom that I thought the little critters might be happier right here on the old homestead. She was a bit miffed that I would be so ungrateful, as she had gone to a lot of trouble to bag these babies. The dear old girl had tipped a wee bit of sherry and her exact words were a tad sharper, but no way was I going to drive back to Berkeley with a couple of rotting cow corpses in the trunk, even if it did spell curtains between me and Bo Peep. It seems that Juliette had a biggish collection of these animals in her room at home, cheek by jowl with at least a hundred dolls.

On our trip back to Berkeley, Juliette showed me the pistol she had retrieved from the ranch. “For The Revolution,” she said. Shortly thereafter she dropped both me and the revolution for some frat guy.



For a short time I owned an Amphicar. Not a very practical vehicle for daily transportation unless you happen to live in the middle of a



this can't be a good idea

long term parking at the bottom of Squantz Pond in Connecticut.

My next car was another Morris Traveler, which Margaret and I rebuilt in a sheep barn one winter. Margaret had sewn the upholstery and I fitted the dashboard with instrument cases containing little theatrical vignettes. One case featured a tiny woman doing a striptease with a snake on a vaudeville stage. The scene had a small

large puddle. This was a German made convertible in the most convertible of senses. Put the top down, lock the doors, drive into the water and cruise around. Waves? Not a problem. Just sink to the bottom and swim home. Imagine a production car whose owner's manual recommended wearing life preservers. My Amphicar is currently in



chicks love this

easel on which I had placed a microscopic sign reading “The Amazing Ruth.” At her feet was a diminutive dress, a tiny bra, panties and stockings. They used to make thousands of tiny people (about 5/8" tall in bare feet) for use in ‘N gauge’ model railroads. I’ve collected a good many of these people and although none are posed committing unspeakable acts, some are doing things I’ve never done.



Renting cars can be a lot of fun if you know what to rent. I once had to go to Florida and so I rented a Dodge Charger. This might have been about 1971; the Charger had a very nice V8, and it was dern quick out of the chute. I was there with Von Trapp and neither of us had been to Florida before, and so we took a couple of days to see the Keys. We discovered that some of the roads were paved with tar and ground-up coral. The coral came from all the reefs they had blasted holes through so that fishing boats could pull right up to the bar in Key Largo. The roads got very slick when wet because of the high calcium content. In fact, it felt like driving on wet soap. We discovered that if you were cruising along on one of these roads at 60 you could drop the car into reverse and it dutifully went into reverse. The wheels would go backwards even as you were moving forward. In a few seconds the car slowed down on the wet road until it was at a dead stop with the tires spinning like mad. I reasoned that if this was true of a wet road it should hold for a dry road; sure enough, the wheels go into reverse. I have since found that this works on most (but not all) rentals. The neat thing about a dry road is the incredible smoke cloud that roils from beneath the car as you grind to a halt. If you bring the car to a stop with the wheels turning at about 4,000 rpm you can drop it back into forward...time seems to stand still for a second...and then you creep ahead, through the stinking cloud of rubber smoke, and when the tires finally grab, the car rockets forward. In the mirrors you can see the residents flooding into the streets looking for the volcano.

Von Trapp and I also discovered that if you drive over the railroad tracks in Miami you have to go pretty fast otherwise you will actually end up straddling the rails. It generally takes about half an hour to jack yourself off the tracks even if the train engineers are leaning out the window and screaming at you, which they will definitely do if you mess about on their tracks.

Amid all this confusion, the Charger's rear view mirror snapped itself off the windshield and took a chunk of glass with it. This was before I became handy with five-minute epoxy so we had quite a time

propping the mirror up. We almost cleared the rental agency, but as the rental people were parking the car, the mirror slowly pulled free with strands of gummy glue. They had the presence of mind to seize our luggage until we paid for the damage. I guess that was fair since we had gone through an entire set of tires (including the spare) in three days and lost the jack to boot.

Never Pick Up a Pizza in a Turbo Carrera

When my friend John Hanson made it big, he got his first fat check and paid cash for a brand new 911 Porsche. I went over to see the car, which even today is still one of the greatest cars ever made. We decided to pick up a pizza and John took me on a thrilling ride at speeds in excess of a 100 in a residential neighborhood signposted at a somewhat slower speed. We were going far too fast to read them. John had gotten excited and ordered an extra large pie with double or maybe even triple everything. This monster weighed in at about 20 lbs., and I had to hold it on my lap for the trip home. The box was mighty hot and it just slumped over my legs like a bag of lava. We were about to push through the sound barrier, and I was busy trying to keep from dying under the pizza when some old lady had the bad judgment to pull out of her driveway. "Hold on!" John yelled. To what, I thought?

He hit the brakes and the molten topping left its crust and skedaddled out of the box and down my legs. We had just gone from 90 to zero in about a half a second and I was screaming like a girl whose Barbie has been stuffed in a blender.

I hopped out of the car, but I was still in serious danger of looking like a pizza myself so I shook off my shoes and slipped off my pants. I have never been a big fan of underwear and that afternoon was no exception. The startled woman we nearly hit was perplexed by the half-naked man leaping around in her driveway, but rather than try to explain I got back in the car and folded myself ungracefully onto the seat, not daring to put my feet down into the terrifying flow of anchovies and cheese.

Poor John. He had only put 12 miles on the car. He never did get rid of the smell, even after ripping the carpeting out. We did polish off the pizza, though. Heck, the floor was clean enough to eat off of.

In the mid-'80s, I became a Cadillac man once again with a lustrous, metal flake turquoise '69 convertible which I bought from a grand old gentleman who had purchased it new as his dream car. He had to give it up as he had recently lost his license due to having failed the driving test. When I paid him, his eyes filled with tears. He told me how he had loved that car, and lamented the loss of his freedom and the

fleeting brevity of life... “Hey, snap it up with the the keys, old timer!” The engine had so much torque that when I floored it, I lost sight of the road for a couple of seconds as it reared up and practically spit fire before leveling out with a roar.



4,300 lbs and eight cow hides

That Caddy was a prodigious beast, but for raw power nothing will ever match The Amazing Ruth's '57 Dodge. She called it “Sweetheart.” The black and white paint job should have been the tip off. Big Al had just taken the car in some shady deal, but he went to that big card game in the sky before he got a chance to put it through its paces. It seems that the car had originally been equipped as a police car and had the famous Dodge Hemi engine, with a fearsome 456 hp power plant. It was a cop hotrod. These were the days when it was all about muscle and neither the oil crisis nor those irritating emission controls had yet been dreamed up to slow us down. By the late '80s police cars were so gutless that they couldn't catch a '57 Dodge Hemi. This I know for a fact. The car circulated between my sister, Marilyn, and me over the years until my sister blew the engine. Jane was driving Sweetheart over the car-eating pass called The Grapevine on her way to Vegas where she cracked kneecaps for a local ‘businessman.’ She regularly made the Vegas run at over 90 mph (she had once been an MP and relied on her police badge to keep the highway patrol at bay). On one of these trips, there was an explosion, followed immediately by smoke, flames, and fist-sized dents in the hood, as if aliens were trying to smash their way out. She knew this was a bad thing for the car, plus it was going to slow her down, so she sold Sweetheart to the tow truck driver for salvage, as if it was just a corpse. He threw in a ride to her job. That car had been like a child to Ruth and a kissin' cousin to me. Jane later told me that the low oil light had been on for so long it had simply lost credibility. No jury of my peers would have convicted me if I had strangled her for the murder of Ruth's lovely car.

One car that caused a good deal of notice was the '92 Cadillac DeVille, which I bought new and repainted with Zolatone. Zolatone is an unusual paint, consisting of different colors of lacquer suspended in water. You spray it on using very low pressure and the paint splatters the surface with four colors at once. It's the type of paint used for garbage truck liners and missile silos. The effect is a convincing gran-



off to the happy crushing grounds

happy to pass it down through the food chain. Having three boys, from a car standpoint, is like standing on the edge of a nest feeding baby birds. There is always a kid waiting to gobble a tasty Cadillac or Lincoln. When the kids are done with them the cars head for the wrecking yard. We seem to simply suck all the life out of them.



There are a few other things you can do with an old car, though. Once in the middle of a desert, we let a 1972 Ford Country Squire loose so we could hunt it down. I drove a pickup truck while two guys crazier than me shot at the Squire with a variety of rifles and shotguns. I pictured strapping the bullet-riddled car to the shoulder of an elk and going back to town with it but it didn't seem practical.

I finally got tired of driving badly engineered Cads. Although they are truly the most comfortable cars in the world (they are designed from the driver's ass, out), the engines and transmissions blow up as often as party balloons. So I moved to a Lincoln Town Car. At the time, it was the largest production car in America and probably still is. I like a deal, so I looked for a two-year lease return and found just the car: a year and a half old, less than 18,000 miles for 20 grand. I bought it on the last day of the year on the theory that the salesman would be trying to make quota and would be in a dealing mood.

Somehow I met up with, not the greenhorn salesman I had envisioned taking advantage of, but rather the owner of a megaplex of car dealerships, Larry Shen. Larry was still a car salesman at heart and he just *had* to make an occasional deal to keep *his* skin in the game. I was his match that day, and eventually got such a low price right before the closing bell that a little while later he suffered seller's remorse and

ite look and it is as tough as stone too. It isn't shiny and never needs washing. I topped it off with a shapely hot water faucet for a hood ornament. I liked the look, but they didn't appreciate me very much at the Cadillac dealership. They thought that I was mocking them and I guess I was but there wasn't much they could do about it. I drove that car for five years and by then I was

committed suicide. In truth, it wasn't just that I had practically stolen the car from him but that he had also been playing fast and loose with the books and had kited around \$20 million in bad checks. How one kites that much is a mystery. Gringos would do a couple of years and hop back into business, but family honor counts for a great deal more in a Chinese family.

I have met a few gringos with some pretty high standards, though. Like Kjesll (pronounced Shell) Kavale. My friend Keith ('the world's fastest bed' from The Sand Hill Challenge) said that he wanted me to meet '*The Car Guy*' of California. If anyone is *The Car Guy* it's Kjesll. He introduced the MG to America and when I first met him he was in his 53rd year as a car dealer. He sold the first VWs in the West and now he is the British Motors dealer in San Francisco. Keith introduced me to Kjesll and Kjesll loaned me one of his new cars called the Kavale Mangusta (it means mongoose in Italian; hey, all the good names were taken). Kjesll decided that after years of selling cars he wanted to get into the business of making them, so at the age of 76 he bought the old deTamasso factory in Modena, Italy, and started manufacturing cars that looked like Italian sports cars but had the soul of the Dodge Hemi. It was a bit of a chore to run the factory from San Francisco but, man, that car was *fasssssst!* It had a supercharged rocket engine with just a paintjob and a pair of license plates.

After building just a few hundred cars, the factory doors closed forever. Kjesll had laid out a few tens of millions on this proposition, which is odd considering that he used to own the Jensen Motor Car Company and should have known better. I once had a lemon yellow Jensen Interceptor. This car was supposed to be a rival for the Aston Martin back in the early '70s. This was an English car, into which they had crammed a Chrysler 440 cubic inch engine. It wouldn't run in the rain or in the heat or uphill. On a good day it was a sexy beast, but the Interceptor had few good days. It had great lines, though. I eventually sold it to a fellow who was so thrilled that he said he was just going to take it home and put it in the driveway and just look at it. That is the ideal use for this car. The car overheated on him a couple of miles down the road and had to be towed home.

Today I drive the exceedingly rare BMW 747. The story of how I came by this car is a bit convoluted. I woke up one day with the clear notion that I needed a hammerhead shark sculpture to hang in the restaurant, so I created an 8-foot hammerhead with the teeth of an African lion and the fur of a Bengal tiger. The skin is a clever paint job in which tiger fur has been accurately rendered in shiny airbrushed lacquer. The tiger side of the shark's personality emerges from an

aircraft body of riveted panels, which seem to be ripped away halfway down the body so the rear of the shark morphs into a jet aircraft complete with engines. Gary Irving, with his firm Air By Hobbs, is a surfboard painter and his interpretation of my idea so far exceeded my expectations that I decided he needed a bigger canvas. Like a car. I pictured the same sort of riveted aircraft look that he had done on the shark, and so I bought a new 740iL and gave it to Gary. Five months later he returned it as the 747 and that's what I drive today.

I have since made some additional modifications. The sound system delivers 135 decibels, outside the car, but I have never turned it past halfway. I have a small mixing console on the dash, which allows me to play the sound of an F14 (with sonic boom) from beneath the car. I have other sounds, including a train horn, but it is so disturbing for my fellow road warriors to hear a train coming along on the Golden Gate Bridge that I am reluctant to use it. I have made some other improvements on the car but I dare not speak their names. Let me just say that it is not a good idea to drive too close behind me if you value your paint job.



Chapter 15.

ZEBRAS IN THE CHICKEN HOUSE

But life isn't just an endless series of recreational pyrotechnics and reckless driving. Or is it?

We once had a fleet of large trucks parked at our home in the Santa Cruz Mountains. Our neighbors, the Seeders, asked us if we could store several semi-truck trailers and school busses while they were getting their property graded to make room for the trucks. No problem. The Seeders are a couple of backwoods anarchists who live in the same school bus they first moved into in about 1977. They used the trucks to stage their operations. They aren't the kind of anarchists who toss those cute, round cartoon bombs into grand dukes' carriages. No, they merely sell rare and exotic seeds from all over the world. And they aren't Luddites, but simply citizens of the 19th century. For instance, they print their annual catalogue on a linotype machine. A linotype is a 2,000-lb



"hey, watch the toes!"

typewriter, closer to what Gutenberg used than a modern laptop. As you type, this remarkable contraption casts strips of letters from a pot of molten lead. The Seedman is something of an endangered species himself; in his early 20s he became a backwoods curmudgeon and has grown masterfully into the role. One of his few capitulations to modernity is

his website, www.jlhudsonseeds.net.

The Seedman walks barefoot in the forest, collecting seeds and observing life under the redwood canopy. He and his co-conspirator, the Seedwoman, attend conferences all over the world, promoting species diversity and doing their part to keep the world on course. The Seedman might startle you if you stumbled across him in the woods but he is as harmless as Captain Kangaroo and I think the reports of cannibalism are probably exaggerated. It's me the neighbors have to worry about.

The Seeders eventually moved their trucks and trailers off of our

property, leaving a legacy of some very unusual plants that now spring up all over the meadow. I was sorry when the donkeys ate the little baobab trees. The Seeders left one truck behind, which they promised to haul away for recycling. I asked them if they would mind if we blew it up first. This truck was a biggish slab-sided delivery truck and a perfect candidate for exploding. I think it prudent not to tell you exactly how the charges were set, but I can say that items commonly found at home can blow a good sized truck to bits (though perhaps these components are only common in my home). We exploded the truck for one of the boys' birthday parties. You can go about whacking at a piñata all you care to, but blowing stuff up is what kids really want. I wish I could tell you about some of the other stuff we did but some of it is actually dangerous, even by my standards.

All of this illustrates that you can have a great deal of adventure right in your own back yard, especially if you live miles from the main road and your neighbors are as crazy as you are.



We bought our property the old-fashioned way, meaning back in the '70s. It will break your heart to hear that we paid less than 4 cents per square foot. For 80 acres, that came to about 160 grand. We're zoned agricultural, so we raise eggs, honey, flowers, and tomatoes to make you cry. We built the house in 1977 and at the time we were still hippies so we had a windmill for water and we used fire for heating and cooking. Margaret composted everything in sight. Nothing's changed much since then except that we had kids, they grew up and all left home. Gee, that was quick.

The first structure we built was a big barn, where we intended to



at the ridgeline

put the animals, while we lived in a tipi in the yard. As we were roofing the place one cold winter afternoon, I realized that the animals were going to live in a better house than we were. So we converted the cow stall to a kitchen and moved in. It was pretty primitive at first. We hadn't planned for niceties such as power, water,

interior walls or insulation. The first thing we did was run a little wire around so we could have lighting. When I came home from work at night, I would plug my truck into the house and the place would glow uncertainly.

When the boys got out of bed they would all huddle around the fire, grumbling through bluish lips and trying to stop shaking. It was more pleasant in the summer, except for the battalions of mosquitoes, which would swarm through the cracks in the walls. The cobwebs caught a lot of them and most of the rest were snatched by the bats. It seemed perfectly normal to be helping the kids with their homework while two or three bats swooshed in front of our faces, while we combed the dogs for ticks.



I guess we must have looked like the Addams family and although the mosquitoes and bats no longer come in we let webs stay because we like the effect.

The kids never really took to the country. You would think they would be out there in nature but the fact is they rarely left the house. They much preferred to go downtown with their friends. When they were about five, seven and nine they launched a short-lived revolt. They solemnly marched up to me while I was reading and Dylan said, "We want to move downtown. We are tired of stepping in chicken poop. The rocks hurt our feet. And we want a TV." I told them to call me when they settled in.

Only in recent years have we discovered that the forest gives up its secrets easily. My son Tyler, Godzilla and I like to hunt for poisonous mushrooms and take pictures of them.



godzilla hunts for food

I can say with confidence that a walk though my neighborhood is not like a walk through yours unless you happen to live in a zoo or on a movie set. We are surrounded by deer, bobcats, redtail hawks, vultures and even an occasional mountain lion.

One night I looked out toward the swimming pool to see a great blue heron standing in the shallow end happily spearing the frogs that mob the pool in the winter.

But all that isn't what is so unusual.

Doug, our next-door neighbor, is excellent at many things, but even he admits that his fence building lacks a certain something, like the ability to actually contain the animals. I love watching the animals frolic in the yard but a half-dozen zebras, followed by miniature donkeys, a herd of llamas, and a troop of emus, ostriches, peacocks, wild turkeys, goats, horses, sheep and a Brahma bull can strip a place as bare as the surface of the moon. A 350-lb ostrich, when riled, can stomp one of his fences as flat as an unlucky rodeo rider in about 6 seconds. But it wasn't these birds who terrorized us, it was the Attack Zebras.



"don't worry mom — it's only zebras"

We never see the mountain lions because they are frightened of the zebras. There are far more zebras in our yard than lions. Lions are supposed to eat zebras, but California lions are wimps and they prefer less dangerous fare. For a while, the zebra infestation got pretty severe.

One of the zebras came at me on a moonless night and bit me ferociously. What was up with that? A short time later, Margaret moved the chicken house and we wrapped the chicken run on all sides with fencing even underground to keep the predators out. The next day Margaret was upset to discover gopher holes; she was certain that they would get the eggs and the skunks would follow and eat the chickens. It didn't sound right to me; gophers had never made it through the wire before. Then I saw the dog nosing one of the holes. HA! Wait a minute; these holes were made by hooves.

"Don't worry, Margaret!" I called out, "It's only zebras in the chicken house!"

Omar the camel likes to visit too. He has been known to stick his head in the kitchen window and snatch a loaf of bread off the kitchen

counter, swallowing the entire thing, bag and all. Omar is an overgrown puppy of a dromedary camel and his head is authentically 9 feet tall from his toes to his nose. And he's not alone; Marrakech is Omie's main squeeze. After rooting about through the kitchen window, they head straight for the wisteria. We would occasionally hear the kids yelling: "Omar, Mary, *go home*. Mom is going to skin you alive and nail you up the barnside!"

Two of Doug's horses wandered over once and Tyler, then 16, thought that he would just hop up on one and go for a little ride. "OK Tyler," I cautioned, "but keep in mind that these are unbroken horses." He said, "Yes, right, they look undamaged, Dad." Quick as a day trader with a trust fund, he hopped smoothly from rock to horse. I checked my second hand. 1...2...2 1/2. *Bing!* A new world record had been set. Five years later, Tyler's horseback time was still hovering around the 2-1/2 second mark, but the kid is hell-fire on a camel.

Margaret occasionally gets disheartened when her garden is stripped as if the locusts had dropped by for a snack. One evening she went over to work out some fence arrangement with Doug but failed to return. After a time we noticed that she had been gone for quite a while so the boys and I went outside and heard her calling from the woods for rescue. It seems that two of the zebras had treed her and were snagging their teeth and lifting a rear hoof in that characteristic "I'm about to kick you as far as I can, sucka!" posture. I took a short wooden fence

post, intending to make a point. The alpha zebra had no fear of some chump swinging a puny stick but I let him have it square on the head and he just glared at me, barely flinching. He was utterly unimpressed. One of the boys took off his shirt and threw it over the miscreant's eyes and



Margaret jumped down from the tree and we all ran back to the house.

Except for an occasional killer zebra and one llama who likes to chest-butt, they're all relatively tame. Just as we had resolved that we had better not go into the yard without whips and chairs, the two malefactors fell over as dead as zebra rugs. What had happened was that Doug penned them up and they gorged on some fence posts and expired of slivers. The fence post got them in the end after all. We were

scared of them but we were sorry they died. I'm glad to say that the new herd of zebras were bottle-raised and are no more dangerous than tadpoles.

Doug has every imaginable sort of pheasant and chicken, and parrots are everywhere. There are perhaps 250 birds in all, from lovebirds to gigantic, screeching macaws. In the spring the parrots take flight with their hatchlings and the skies are illuminated with a reeling, shrieking rainbow of birds.

Doug once had a sweet dog named Hooper. Hooper was a St. Bernard but the lowliest saint never led such a life. Hooper took up with the pigs as a pup and grew up thinking he was a hog with fur. Hogs really do like rolling in the mud and snorting up roots with their snouts. Hooper spent his entire life caked in mud and trying to curl his tail. Doug has a single cat too but it is by far the least noticed cat in the Western world. It spends most nights outside our back door howling to be welcomed at our hearth. He is a lovely, good natured cat but (although our dogs like him well enough) our cats will have nothing to do with him.

To the other side of us are Lisa and Bill. They tool around the neighborhood in a 1925 Model T Ford like the one Grandma Duck drove. Lisa is a fiber artist. She has set the bar in this corner of the art world and lectures frequently in far-flung places like Norway and Japan. Bill is an artist, too, but he works in metal. I used to look at his conglomerations of tire rims and welding tanks and think clunk-y. But like so many, he evolved to meet my expectations and now he creates sculptures of soaring grace. No one else I know can pound and stretch metal into such fluid shapes. Bill is something of a mountain man and has been known to go out into the backyard and take down a wild boar and roast it over one of his mammoth barbeques. He likes to put glass eyes in the boar to mess with the flatlanders. When his visitors see one of these creatures looking at them calmly as it turns on the spit it gives them the willies.

Bill's house is made of metal, his fencing is sheet metal; indeed, the whole place is entirely metal. If he were to lose an arm or a leg, he could just replace it with a metal one and, well, you've seen the movie. Bill is the one we call when we have a kid trapped on a precipice or the house is on fire. He still comes to save us even after we used to torture him with the cannon. The boys discovered that if you take a small balloon (just 6") and fill it with acetylene and oxygen it is a perfect device for terrorizing Bill. I wonder where they got that idea? The boys found two 55-gallon drums out in the woods, which had been welded into a long tube, open at one end. Somehow they figured out that it would make a pretty nifty air cannon. They nailed it to a tree and

pointed it at Bill's house, half a mile away. One of them would crawl in and tape the gas-filled balloon to the bottom of the cannon and then apply a match through a small hole. The shock wave would unroll across the valley with a tremendous boom and strike Bill's workshop like the fist of God. We laughed 'til we cried when we saw Bill come tearing out, swearing like a stevedore and brandishing a hammer, hot from his forge, like some modern-day version of Thor. The boys did this about five times and Bill never knew what hit him. Until now.

Hey, It's a Living!

An old cowboy named Chris True lives farther along the hill. He runs Black Angus and has a pretty successful sideline running Cow-chip Bingo. High schools hire him for fundraising events. This is how it works: Chris chalks out the football field in a grid and numbers each square. People then buy squares like a football pool and Chris walks a well-fed Brahma bull around the field until the bull deposits his calling card on a numbered square, thereby indicating the winner.

Moving up ridge a piece, you'll discover Neil Young's ranch (yes, that Neil Young) and the Djerassi ranch after that. Carl Djerassi synthesized the compound that gives the birth control pill its snap, crackle and pop and so he is called the 'father of the birth control pill'; a pretty funny title when you think about it. Carl, not content to rest on his abundant laurels, has gone on to be a professor at Stanford, and is the author of several books and plays. He has brought an intellectual and artistic vigor to our hills with his Djerassi Art Foundation. The Foundation brings notable artists from all over the world to spend a month creating sculpture, painting, music, dance, writing and more.

Dale is Carl's son. A more cheerful and self-actualized person would be hard to find. After knowing Dale for several years, I became curious as to how he was able to emerge as a self-confident character with such a famous father. He said it wasn't always easy but he



carl, marilyn and dale

remembers the exact moment when he got his father's full attention. Dale was driving into the ranch and Carl was hiking along the road. Dale stopped to greet his father and Carl did a double take at the passenger in the back seat. It was an adolescent silverback gorilla just sitting there in its seat belt, holding a stuffed toy. Carl looked at Dale in a whole new way after that, because it was exactly

the sort of thing that Carl himself would have done. Dale had bought the gorilla, Koko, to donate to the Gorilla Foundation next door. That was about 30 years ago and Koko lives there still.

Now collaborators, Dale and Carl produce plays in major cities around the world. When Dale isn't doing that he is scouring the planet in search of adventure and championing native peoples from the Arctic to the Amazon. Dale is always full of surprises. One night he called from his car while he was escorting Senator Hillary Clinton to an event in San Francisco. Another time he had the King of Sweden and Isabella Rossellini in the car at the same time. I asked Dale if he was concerned about driving the King around in his ratty old Volvo and Dale said the King loves Volvos.



dale smooches the teenage koko

The Gorilla People

The Koko Gorilla Foundation people are always fundraising and I suggested to them that it would be nifty if Robin Williams stopped by for a photo op. He had just come in for coffee at Buck's on his way to a movie set down the street where he was filming the long forgotten piece of dreck, *Millennium Man*.

I called Robin's agent in LA and told her that we had a talking gorilla in town and that Robin would surely enjoy meeting her. Actually, I explained, we had two talking gorillas so there would be no waiting, immediate service. Silence on the line. I tentatively asked, "You've heard of Koko, right?"

"Nooo," she answered. I could understand that if someone hadn't heard of Koko, who communicates using American Sign Language, that person might think I was not entirely sound, but I went on though I knew I was losing her. She thanked me cautiously, as you might some over-eager new neighbor who promises to be your, "very, very bestest new friend ever."

A few months later my son Dylan was standing in line for the bathroom at Buck's. He had just seen Sting at a table so in his enthusiasm Dylan said to the guy waiting ahead of him that he'd just seen the rocker. The guy turned and asked excitedly, "Where, where?" It was Robin Williams. It seems they were both taking their families to see the gorillas.

Crossing to the next hill, we might find Jacques Littlefield tinkering around in his driveway. “What’s this one Jacques?” we might ask. “Oh,” he would tell us, “this is the lightest of my heavy tanks at 60 tons, a Chiefton Mk VI.” Jacques collects tanks and other bits of military hardware, such as missile launchers, half-tracks and mobile cannons.



get rich quick!

Years ago, when I had only known Jacques casually and I heard that he liked the odd bit of mechanical flotsam (if you can call a 74-ton British Conqueror tank flotsam), I showed him my latest acquisition. Actually I was reluctant to bring the thing out of my office because it nearly killed the first guy I showed it to.

Uranium Induced Trauma

I bought a classic, early '50s Geiger counter and a book that explained how one could go to the desert, kick a few rocks, whip out The Atomix™ Geiger counter and listen for the tick tick tick **and strike it rich!!** “Forget that life as a plumber’s apprentice,” the manual promised. “Drive a new Cadillac car by finding Uranium! Yes, it is just lying around waiting to be picked up if you only know how to find it!” Never mind that plumbing can pay really well and you need millions in capital equipment plus the mining rights to harvest uranium.

One day, I saw a friend at a table at Buck’s and dragged out my Geiger counter. He was sitting with someone I didn’t recognize and I went into my story about how funny it was that back in the '50s it was quite the thing to go hunting uranium. Immediately the guy he was with started to choke. He turned the color of old lead and his eyes sort of rolled, whites up, like a dead fish. After some ineffective backslapping he came back into focus and took a drink of water. He said he was sorry but the Geiger counter had given him such a shock that it had practically stopped his heart. “Funny,” I thought, “I didn’t even put the batteries in.” He went on to explain that his father had read a book about getting rich from uranium when he was a kid and that dear ol’ dad had sold up and moved them all to New Mexico. There dad promptly went broke, the family split up, and he never saw his father again. This guy’s father used this exact same kind of Geiger counter. “Maybe it was this very one,” I suggested. At that, he started to cry.

“Hookay. I think I’ll go now,” I said.

I let the Geiger counter cool off for a few months before I brought it out to show Jacques. I cranked out the routine about how absurd it was that people thought that they could wander around in the desert and make a fortune with this sort of thing.

"Well," Jacques said, "perhaps it is unlikely but it is *not* impossible."

"Oh?" I said.

"Sure, in fact it worked for my father. He ended up being the largest uranium miner in the world."

"Hookay. I think I'll go now."

By any measure Jacques is pretty well off. He actually vacations at Fort Knox, where he sits on the Patton Museum Board. Jacques says that Fort Knox is where they keep all the good stuff: the only collection of army tanks larger than his (Jacques has about 90 actual tanks at last count, but the gap is rapidly closing) and the largest pile of gold in the world.

Jacques was single for several years and it became something of a contact sport among his friends to introduce him to eligible women. Underneath his veneer of funny-smart-handsome is an authentic love-bug. He and I were having dinner one night and I told him that I knew of a woman he might like to meet and that I would call him with the particulars on Monday. When I called Monday, he said he was off the market.

"What do you mean you're off the market? Friday you were right there with the ripe tomatoes."

"Yes," he said, "but now I've been tagged and bagged. I'm getting married."

"Jacques, how do you go from single to engaged in two days? I need notice to clear the pipeline. What do I do with all these single-smart-attractive-funny women? And how did this happen?"

"Remember I told you I was going to have lunch with Henry and Nancy Kissinger on Saturday?" he asked.

"Yeah," I said, "I asked you to remind Henry that I still thought he was a war-mongering dirtbag."

I could hear Jacques rolling his eyes but he went on. "I was sitting across from Sandy Montenegro. You know we had been seeing one another off and on, but then I looked into her eyes and realized all of a sudden that I was in love with her. She looked back and I knew she felt the same way. When we got up from the table I asked her to marry me." (Oh, waiter, I'll have what they're having.)

"So Jacques," I asked, "Did you bring up the 'dirtbag' part to Henry?"

"No," he said lightly, "I forgot."

I couldn't believe it. Soooo selfish.

Jacques and Sandy got married and we all went to Poland to celebrate. We attended a tank rally on the Baltic, along with thousands of men, women and children all dressed in the uniforms of the United States, Britain, Germany, Poland and even Russia. I can't see the appeal to a Pole of dressing like a Russian soldier but apparently it is their way of remembering. It's a strange world out there.

Do you know what a Polish cross-dresser is? It's someone who dresses up like an SS officer one weekend and a Crow American Indian the next. The Friends of the Crow Indian Society has powwows all summer in several camps throughout Poland.

Jacques got a real peach with Sandy. I knew she was my kind of person when I joked that we should try to buy the hat off the head of the Polish border guard. After a brief negotiation, Sandy rode away with the hat.

Each of my friends could be an entire book and I haven't even started on the felons yet, but it's time to get out of town and see something of the rest of America.



no parking zone

Chapter 16.

CRAZY AS AN OUTHOUSE RAT

In 1999, the glorious internet boom was drawing to a close even as the stocks were skyrocketing. The marketing strategy of the *new economy* is what's called 'closed system recursion' (at least by me.) This is a system employing self-deception so profound that Masayoshi Son, the founder of the venture firm Softbank, had a paper net worth greater than anyone else ever in the history of the world and in 9 months he lost \$75 billion. On the way down he renamed the firm Mobius (as in mobius strip, an endless strip of paper leading nowhere.) Masayoshi is still a billionaire but losing \$276 million a day has got to put you in a foul mood. Which reminds me of the joke about the diamond.

"So Murray," says Al. "I've got a very nice one-carat diamond with a little flaw. I can let you have it for just \$3,000."

Murray examines the diamond. "I'll take it."

A week later, Al calls Murray and says, "You know that diamond I sold you? I'm willing to buy it back and I'll give you \$3,500."

"That's a good deal," says Murray. "I'll sell you back the diamond."

Over the next few weeks, they sell the diamond back and forth for an ever-greater amount.

Finally, Al calls Murray once more. "The diamond," he says, "I'll give you \$8,000 for it."

Murray says, "But Al, I sold the diamond to someone else."

"But Murray," Al says, whimpering, "We were making a good living on that diamond!"

In Silicon Valley, all the brainiacs should have been trying to figure out who was buying all of those banner ads, but instead they got diverted by Y2K.

There are two kinds of people:

1. People who took Y2K seriously.
2. People who thought that the Y2Kers were crazy.

Today you can't find anyone who thinks Nixon was a good president yet he had the largest popular vote in history. Likewise, look for a Y2Ker today and they've all evaporated. In the late '90s they were everywhere, but like all doomsday cults they fell into the old trap of betting the ranch on the end of the world. When the date came it wasn't

the world as we know it that ended but the Y2Kers themselves. The Y2Kers hollered at anyone who would listen that embedded computer systems were running the whole shee-bang, sort of like the Morlocks in *The Time Machine*, while we fools danced and sang in the sunlight. The idea was that all of our machines would suddenly believe that they hadn't been invented yet, thereby nullifying their inception and erasing themselves. Poof! All gone! Heavy trip, dude. Since programmers hadn't thought to make room for the 1 to change to a 2, 1999 would turn into 1900 in this tragic scenario.

People who read *People Magazine* were fed the notion that the modern world was going down, right along with the ball in Times Square, at midnight sharp. It's ironic that there was plenty of lip and ink behind this notion while at the same time the heads of major corporations were 'borrowing' 100s of millions from their stockholders and blowing the money on Rembrandts, yachts and dames. "Who cares, the end of the world is coming."

Now I may not be a big city programmer, but I have pulled apart more than one toaster in my time and I'll be darned if I could find one part marked 'embedded system.' "What a dope," my betters laughed when I floated this observation by them. They patiently explained, as if to an infant, that you can't *see* embedded systems. They are abstract programming notions on itty-bitty chips, certainly not accessible to some guy who makes his living selling pancakes. So companies large and small reprogrammed night and day to vigilantly stem the tide of Armageddon. "We'll have our day," the Y2Kers shrieked, "you'll see!"

It was common knowledge that, no matter how hard the programmers worked, so much would be missed that we should expect at least a few airplanes to fall from the sky. Elevators would realize that they missed their lube jobs by 999 years and would plunge to the basement from the 83rd floor, the passengers in free fall screaming, "I should have listened..." Automobiles built between 1987 and 1998 would simply quit, and all the power, food production, transportation, hospitals and government would squeak to a halt at midnight. Prison doors would spring open and the cockroaches would take back Wall Street. We would stumble around in the gathering gloom, wearing crooked party hats, guzzling the last of the Champagne, and toasting the cataclysm.

As we approached the final days it became clear that selfish countries like France had once again failed to do their share. Disorganized countries like Russia and Egypt had not lifted a finger to avert catastrophe. Given their disastrous history of failed planning, they should have known better.

Here in the civilized world there was a brisk business in guns (isn't

there always?), bottled water, tents, dried food and survival gear. Americans generally react to the news of Armageddon by digging a fallout shelter, or planning a run to the country in the minivan, using every cubic inch of Extra Storage Capacity for carbines and shotguns. Naturally, we outfitted the entire family, including the cat, with chemical suits and gas masks.

Every generation since we started keeping records shows us that people believe two things:

1. Kids are no good today.
2. The end of the human race is not far off.

I know there are a few of you who jump around like fleas on a griddle, trying to defend your point that the millennium didn't flip over until the end of 2000 and not at the beginning. To those I say: get a hobby. What you say lacks symmetry and simply doesn't sound right, so just back off. This is our Armageddon and we'll cry if we want to.

On the final day of 1999, billions of people smushed their eyeballs onto their Sonys like so many June bugs on a windshield, waiting for the first collapse. The much-anticipated calamity was scheduled to begin in Fiji where the date changes first. Amazingly, the broadcast stayed on, so we realized that Fiji was either so primitive that they escaped embedment or they were so modern that they all had Y2K COMPLIANT stickers on every laptop and Corolla.

Japan would be the big one but the place stayed lit because the Japanese are so perfectly organized that they had managed to find the problems and whip things into shape just in the nick of time. China would be a hurdle but they don't really celebrate the New Year until February, and then it's some time like 6578 so they were never really part of the problem to begin with. From there, midnight passes through the very wired Singapore and places like the completely non-wired Tibet. We braced for Russian ICBMs zipping through the hood, but wait! If things fail they just stop, right? So maybe the missiles would just stay put in their silos as Russia wound down. It would be like finally getting to the last of the concentric wooden dolls they are so inordinately fond of.

"This will fix your clock, Ivan!"

As the hand of doom passed over Europe without incident, we were running out of excuses. The modern Turks are the average culture today: part Fiat, part donkey cart. Turkey sailed through unscathed. By the time they dropped the ball in NYC I had pretty much given up on the end of the world and it was just 9:00 p.m. in California. Thousands of people really did evacuate their families from the cities but they were no doubt back on their leatherette divans by the second half of

the Rose Bowl.

I was so looking forward to going to work on New Year's Day because I knew a bunch of Y2Kers and I wanted to hear what they would say. When the first one strolled in I subtly nudged the conversation around to the fact that "I was right, and you were wrong you big, fat, idiot, na-na-na-na-na-na!"

"Not at all," he said. "It was people like me who fixed the problem." He claimed that the Y2K 'community' had spread the alarm to "every Middlesex village and farm." The programmers had fixed every embedded system with selfless devotion. The fact that it was a perfect fix after they had promised that they would barely make a difference is one of life's little mysteries. Estimates on what was spent on fixing this nonexistent problem run from 35 billion to a half a trillion dollars. I'm still waiting for the exact number.

The Y2Kers were actually mainstream fanatics. They were people much like you and me, just a little bit nuttier. But, there are those walking among us who have far more unusual notions and there is no way to tell if they actually believe what they say, in which case they are insane, or simply lying.

In this camp we find the crop circle and alien abduction people. You know how the whole crop circle thing works, right? For decades, these elaborate designs turned up in wheat fields in England and eventually all over the world. It became clear right away that **they could not possibly be made by humans!** There was just no way someone could walk out into the middle of a wheat field and create these elaborate designs without leaving some trace. It was clearly the work of aliens. Long ago the aliens lost interest in making animal sculptures out of dirt and rock in Peru and snatching airplanes out of the sky near the Bahamas. The days when they aren't fishing people out of trailer parks and checking their rectal temperatures, they were doodling in the cornfields. About 20 years after this began, a couple of old geezers revealed that they were the ones who started it and they even supplied photos of their work in progress. "Very good for you g-d wankers!" howled the crop circle conspiracy adherents. "You may very well have made a few crop circles, but you could not have made them all." Hey, good point.

Of course, many movements began with honorable intentions by hoaxers. There was the couple who, about 30 years ago, founded an organization in Florida to put pants on zoo animals. It seems that these nasty animals were running around *naked* in front of the children with their whatnots in *full view*. I remember a picture of the couple proudly standing next to an elephant dressed in an immense pair of shorts. The movement took off and for a time had quite a few devoted followers.

This made the couple just a little nervous because they had been *kidding*.

No matter, it was an idea whose time had come and in the right place, too. It was just down the road from where Jim Morrison got on the bad side of Anita Bryant at a concert in Florida and she decided to give that spawn-of-the-devil a taste of her lash. So she organized a “Rally for Decency” in Miami. The perennially drunk wife-beater, Jackie Gleason, was her co-host and the penny-loafer youth of ten counties burned piles of Doors records. No doubt Florida is a more wholesome place today as a result.

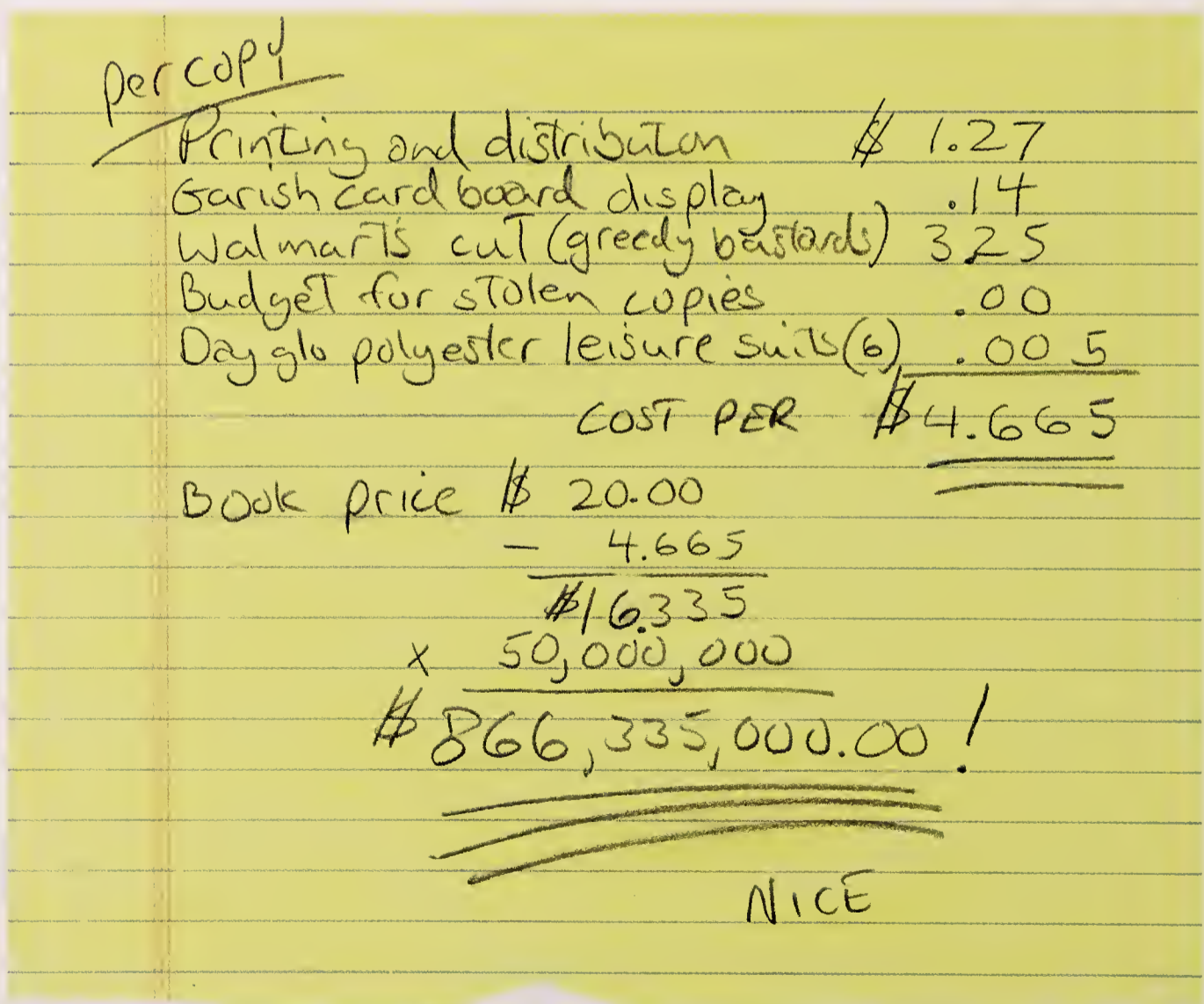
People believe some pretty crazy stuff, like the women who think they were once Joan of Arc (“because I wake up and my feet are hot”). Wait a minute: only one of you could have been Joan of Arc! The rest of you have to pick someone else. The saucer and ghost people are easy to ridicule but punch the Second Coming of Christ button and a surprisingly large number of people will try to punch you back. I’m friends with Y2Kers, so I think I’m pretty flexible, but even I have to draw the line with the Second Comers or the Rapture Crowd (unfortunately, this is about 25% of the American public so I’m counting on those foreign sales). If you believe that there is a certain big event on the way entailing ‘the saved’ being snatched out of everyday life and delivered **BING!** into heaven, leaving the rest of us to do battle with Satan, then just close this book and toss it on the fire, because you will definitely not like what comes next. But I’ll be fair and make myself a big target for your withering scorn, because what I believe in sounds ridiculous, too. So pile up your spitballs for Chapter 20: *Sex, Religion, Physics and Politics, a Comprehensive Analysis*.

Some visitors from the fringe are perfectly acceptable, like those who focus on just three words from Isaiah 30:6, “fiery flying serpents.” This is so obviously proof that man existed alongside of pterosaurs that it is not open to question. David Untred in his book *Dinosaurs in the Bible* tells us that flying dinosaurs lived with the Sioux Indians because *the thunderbird* is a specific reference to flying reptiles and the only flying reptiles ever discovered are pterosaurs. These serpents have been spotted as recently as 1890 when two Arizona cowboys shot a healthy six-footer and displayed it in a local bar. If you can’t trust drunken cowboys, then who can you trust?

But the Rapture Crowd that takes its marching orders from the *Book of Revelation* is far less agreeable. It seems that they are going to be saved while you and I are going to hell. But not straight to hell. There are a few stops first, sort of haunted-house style, before the final destination of eternal damnation. *And* there is not a damn thing you can do about it!

A new branch of this Rapture cult calls itself the *Left Behind Movement*. It's practically guaranteed that no one who has bought any of the 50,000,000 (I'm not exaggerating this) books that Tim LaHaye had a ghostwriter write for him will be reading my book. They take the name of the movement from the fact that you will be "*left be-hind* you big, fat, idiot, na-na-na-na-na-na! when we go to heaven and you don't." The LaHaye books are basically Steven King *lite*, just as preachy as Steven but with fewer of Steve's pornographic child mutilation scenes.

If you tell me that you spent last summer on the Planet Urgot with the Mole People, I say fine. But if you say you are a Left Behinder I will probably lapse into my very excellent Swedish and pretend not to understand anything you say. The Left Behinders believe that when push comes to push harder, you just might be cruising along in a Greyhound bus when the god-fearing bus driver will suddenly disappear from his seat and the 'unsaved' will be left behind screaming as the bus plunges off the Tallahatchie Bridge. Judging by what comes next, these are the lucky ones. I wish I could say, "I'm just fooling with you. I'm making this up." But this is a real phenomenon. The LaHaye books are written as novels so they can't be criticized on scientific or theological grounds, but millions of people are reading between the lines and many claim that their lives have been forever changed.



found in lahaye's trashcan

The taxes will kill him, though. Oh, it's a church? Well Timmy, just forget those taxes then. **Ka-ching!** (I should be dedicating this book to him!)

Check out the customer reviews on Amazon. If the readers were just a few *National Enquirer* types that would be one thing but the audience for this sort of thing is rather biggish. In 2002, CNN conducted a poll that revealed that 36 percent of Americans believe that the Bible is the literal word of God and is to be taken as fact. 59 percent of Americans told pollsters that the prophecies in Revelation are going to come true (*Time Magazine*, July 1, 2002).

It isn't just us Yanks, of course. I read that there is a vigorous movement in Greece criticizing the cartoon mascot that the Greek Olympic Committee is using in their advertising for the 2004 games. Some Greeks feel that Zeus takes offense at being portrayed as a cartoon character. Of course, many folks don't realize that the ancient Greeks didn't believe that their gods were real, but rather that the stories about them were allegorical, employing colorful characters in fables designed to guide one's conduct. That's why the ancient Greeks themselves called it *mythology*.

I am confident that the story of Adam and Eve was supposed to be an allegory, too, but there are quite a few people today who say they believe this Bible story is the way it actually happened.

The Truth About Adam and Eve

From the Early Middle Ages up to the mid 19th century (when pornography became more widely available) Adam and Eve were pictured as innocents just about to share a piece of healthy fruit. The museums of Europe are simply bursting with paintings of them standing around the apple tree with the snake and they are wearing **zip** (or sometimes with the far smuttier fig leaf bikini bottom.) That's right: Adam, Eve, and the snake are n-a-k-e-d. Adam is always pictured with the smallest possible willy and Eve is shown with a scooch extra padding on her bottom, this no doubt to improve our own self image.



The story goes like this: Adam was lonely and God made

“nice abs, adam”

Eve out of a rib he wasn't using. They snuggled up with the snake (not unlike my grandmother), but this snake was from the wrong side of the tracks and, like some fork-tongued dope pusher, he led them down the bad road. Adam and Eve had pretty cushy jobs in Eden. Sort of teenage goodwill ambassadors. But since no visitors ever dropped by they got bored and hungry. One thing led to another...don't make me say it...and out they went and onto the unemployment lines.

We now have a new category on the bookshelves called Creation Science. It's long on creation but skimps a bit on the science part. Everyone is entitled to their own crazy beliefs no matter how humorous I find them but when a basic tenet of someone's religion is: I'm saved, but you are going to spend all of eternity having:

1. Dogs rip your liver out *forever* for coveting your neighbor's wife (why did she dress like that? It cost me my soul!)
2. Some really hostile guy dressed in a Halloween costume poking your be-hind with a pointy stick, *forever*
3. Your publisher not returning your calls, *forever*

...then I say, this sure takes the fun out of fundamentalism.

I have read LaHaye's books but I'm still unclear as to how this trip to heaven is going to work. He never says where heaven is exactly but it must be a physical place if people are going to actually go there, right? Clothes and false teeth, even wedding rings, get left behind in this snake pit we call home. But what about tattoos? Born-again Hell's Angels need answers. How about scars? And what about dandruff or, for that matter, facelifts? What if you got a liver transplant from a sinner? Forget it, leave it behind, you won't need a liver, but what about those great knockers? I think the Rapture folks had better get all this figured out, pronto. Of course, even they admit that they are going to show up at the Pearly Gates naked. "Hey, check out the bazooms on my neighbor's wife!"

We also need to consider what heaven looks like. What's the food like? How about entertainment? Even though I was a hippie, I've seen the butts on some of those who claim to be saved and frankly I think a modest one-piece would be a good idea. If you come from a tradition of burning heretics at the stake, demanding that the sun rotate around the earth and believing that dogs are somehow less than full citizens, take my advice: get a new religion. Dogs are people too.



A good friend of mine was a Y2Ker and he was quite sure that the world, as we knew it, was going to grind to a halt in 1999. So he quit a

very good job as senior VP with an energy firm, cashed in all his stock, bought a magnificent palace on St. Bart's in the Caribbean and split. He had been with Enron for 15 years.

The bum left us all behind.

Note: There is a real chance that between Mo slapping me with *fahat* (which is either a death threat or some sort of foreign food) and Tim sending in the lightning bolts, I will end up in hiding like Elvis and Salman Rushdie but this is bound to have a positive impact on sales. Whee!

The good news is that we have found beds and a bowl of gruel for most of the Y2Kers. The space-alien-living-on-the-backside-of-the-moon people are recruiting and there is still plenty of room at the Scientology Center in Hollywood so that should take care of the rest.



Chapter 17.

ROADSIDE AMERICA

I've been to all the states except Alaska. I'll get there eventually.

I like the traditional tourist sites, like Bridal Veil Falls in Yosemite and Lindbergh's grave in Maui but I'll drive a country mile or 3,000 to see the really wacky stuff.

I heard recently that the redwood tree we drove through back in the '50s had blown over. It seems that if you run a road right through the middle of a living tree you endanger its health. Perhaps they should have picked a bigger tree. This particular tree was special to me, because it's where I first learned the value of a dollar, or rather the value of two cents.

I must have been seven years old or so. We were heading north from Los Angeles ticking off the endless list of lunatic fantasies called Roadside America, when we drove through the tree. We had just seen the Last Supper and Calvary (*"special today—for the same price"*), both sculpted entirely of sand and cement by an artist with *"absolutely no formal training!"* It looked it. Although roadside art can be hilariously funny, most of it is hideous trash. The trashier the better!

When my mother said we were going to stop to see Calvary, I pictured soldiers in blue on horseback with Remingtons and parade swords. You can imagine my disappointment. No matter, we pushed on north to the tree. Marilyn said we were going to drive right through the middle of a



ten cents of pure fun

living tree and I pictured us somehow driving up inside the length of a standing tree and wondered how we would ever get down.

When I saw the picture on the sign out front, I realized that we were going through the short way so I just settled into the back seat of our Studebaker Hawk for this non-fabulous event.

At the lineup to the tree hole, we pulled in behind a man who was blustering heatedly out his truck window at the woman who was selling the right-of-passage for ten cents a car. I can still see his cringing wife,

trying to wish herself invisible. It was obvious to any seven-year-old that his rig was too big to pass through the tree. If his truck was too big, the trailer he was towing was even bigger. The woman at the tollbooth tried reasoning with him, but he kept insisting he could make it. The tollbooth lady had a stick that she held up in front of his truck to illustrate the acceptable width. He finally conceded that he might be willing to leave the trailer but was certain that his truck would fit. I thought that the woman was being unnecessarily patient. After all, she had the stick and he wasn't too big to use it on.

Things were at a complete standstill when my mother got out and marched up to the guy. She proposed that they ride through the tree with us and share the cost. He must have realized that it was their only chance to make the passage, so he pulled over and five of them got out. There was no way they could all fit in with the three of us. The shrinking mother said that she was more than glad to stay behind. I was alarmed; if they couldn't drive through the tree, how would they ever get north? If they left the mother behind, the children would be stuck with the jerk and might never see her again. Kids get all sorts of strange notions, but since I had been left behind once at a gas station I could easily visualize this scenario. I thought that this was the only road north, and that you had to pay your dime and drive through the tree to get any farther.

Well, they piled in and we drove on through, which took about 4 seconds. My mother then told the guy that he owed her 7 cents. He had been prepared to pay a nickel and started to argue over this shakedown. He flat refused to pay the extra 2 cents. Without a second's hesitation, my mother threw the car in reverse and backed into the tree, pinning us all inside. Years later she told me that she had taken the measure of the guy beforehand and expected a hard time, so she laid her trap even before we drove through the tree. She told him that *share* didn't mean *split down the middle*. She told him his family was 4/7th of the load. Glaring at her, he raised a penny to 6 cents. My mother said she was paying the gas, car payments and repairs and she wanted 7 cents and that was the *last* word she had to say on the matter. Marilyn sat calmly at the wheel even as the horns honked behind us and he finally gave up or we would probably be there still. This taught me the value of both money and a sense of the absurd. I also learned that if someone gives you an answer you don't like, just back them into a tree until they give up.

I've driven across the U.S. plenty of times and these are my guidelines for a successful transit of these United States:

Rules of the Road

1. Don't hit the kids in the car. It leads to even more fighting and your smacking arm will eventually become more muscley than your other one.
2. Teach the boys to pee in bottles. Big time saver this.
3. Stop at all bronze trail plaques and make up fanciful things to your kids when they are young. They will grow up with the vague notion that Leif Ericson discovered Hoover Dam and the first Oyster Rolex farm was in Maryland.
4. Truckers do not know where the great restaurants are and stopping at a "World Class, One-of-a-Kind Roadside Diner" instead of a recognized fast fooder will only enrage the children. Don't even bother.
5. Always go out of your way to see anything touted as "bizarre, but true" as well as the largest anything (or, even better, "the second largest" anything) and, also "the strangest" or any place where "gravity takes a holiday." Always ask for the owner and probe for a hidden agenda; there generally is one.
6. Never drive in downtown Darian with a naked woman on your roof.

BONUS RULE #7 Swerve to avoid the deer. Some people say, "Just hit those suckers. It's them or us." I live in the country and I have hit one deer in 25 years but, because I swerve like mad, I've missed about 300. This "just hit them" mentality is an entirely wrongheaded notion from the same catechism that teaches us that leaving fluorescent lights on overnight uses less power.

I once conned my three boys into traveling with me from California to central Canada, then heading west and down the coast from Vancouver. We went in search of bears. I had promised the boys that bears lurked behind most of the trees, just waiting to rip cars open and eat small children. They couldn't wait to see this. We drove about 600 miles a day and, after a few days, even I wanted to ditch the car and fly home, but it was my car so we pushed on. At one point I detected a shimmy in the back, which turned out to be the growing pile of AA batteries my son Rowan was using to power his Gameboy. I don't think he raised his eyes until we got to the Snake River in Idaho.

Who can forget Evel Knievel's famous jump in a rocket-powered motorcycle over the Snake in 1982? Evel made a successful career out of goofing around and wasting everyone's time by splattering himself on the pavement, so naturally he's a hero of mine. We arrived at the site of the jump and were disappointed to find a lack of hideous statuary or



the snake river incident

years into the future, being confronted by their kids with a harebrained plan for some future chair. "This," I intoned, "is big time litter. Litter of the highest sort. In fact, this is mega-litter!"

"But, Dad, it's *already* litter," they said. I thought about the matter gravely. They were right about it already being litter, but did that then mean that we could just throw it into a scenic river merely for the fun of it? Naturally, we did the right thing.

"Say, Dad," one of them asked, "how is it possible to ride a motorcycle across a river this big?"

"It isn't," I answered. "Evel never made it."

I've made dangerous crossings of my own, like the time we drove from San Diego to Detroit across The Great American Desert one summer back when Ike was still president. Signs sprouted up alongside the highway with lurid vignettes showing people dying of thirst with warnings like "Next Services 150 miles." A few, nameless, dust-choked towns clung tentatively to the edges of the vicious desert. Convoys would form up at the beginning of the worst stretches. Some cars had big, rocket-shaped placebos laughingly called air conditioners clamped to one of the windows, but of course all the other windows were open. The smart people went at night. There was an incessant 'thump, thump, thump' sound as we ran down the wildlife. During rutting season (which for rabbits is most days), the highways used to feature a wall-to-wall carpet of blood and fur. Now you hardly ever see that. I guess we must have mowed most of the wildlife flat.

Somewhere in the Midwest, I remember trying to sleep on the floor of the car, the hump in the carpet making that about as comfy as sleeping on a sawhorse. I looked out dazedly one night at the rolling fields of grain in the moonlight and was sure we had left the land and were crossing the Atlantic Ocean. It took at least a week to drive all the way across the country back then, because the roads went smack through the middle of every town. When you pulled into a gas station a

even a shop with a critical mass of costly cheap trinkets and rhinestone Evel-wear. Walking out on the bridge, however, we spotted what looked like a monument of some sort. It turned out to be a vivid pink La-Z-Boy recliner, which had fallen out of a truck. The boys unanimously voted that we toss the chair into the dazzling river 400 feet below. This was a rare opportunity to visualize my boys, 25

chipper lad in a uniform would ask if you would like him to check under the hood, put air in your tires and fill 'er up. "Yeah and hey kid, would you dump this ashtray for me?"

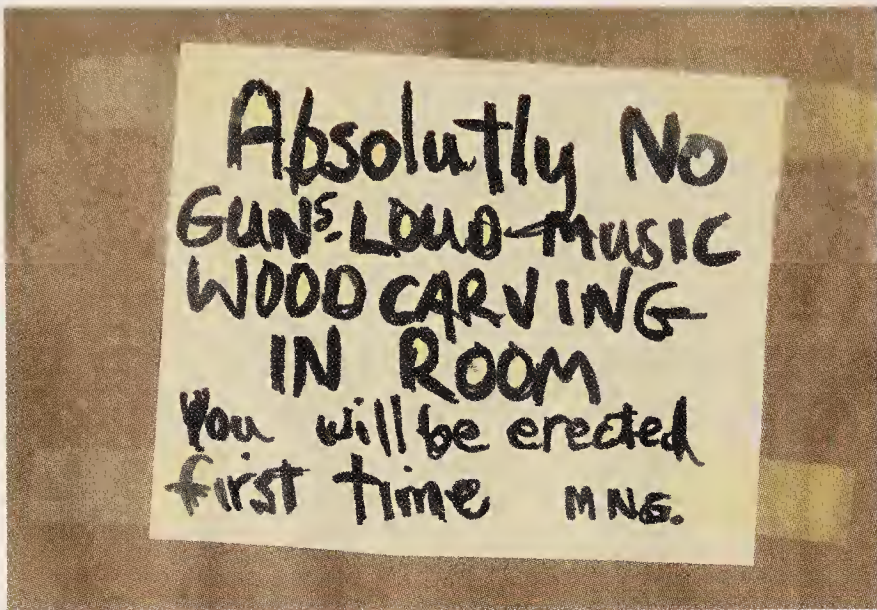
"Yes, sir."

Things in the Road

When you drive a lot you see all sorts of things beside the road. People throw interesting things out at rest stops because they don't want them spotted in their trash at home. The cans are bulging with pornographic magazines and a remarkable number of liquor bottles, for a highway. But it's the stuff actually in the road that is so startling. Once a low-rider was in front of us on the freeway in Santa Barbara and we could see a king-sized mattress on the road in the distance. The driver could have avoided it but ran over it instead; the mattress was trapped beneath the car as they cruised at about 60. They thought it was completely hilarious, but I thought they might be in for more than they bargained for. In about 100 yards the mattress exploded in flames from the friction and the laughing abruptly stopped. The lesson here is: don't drive over large mattresses in a low-rider.

People complain about cell phone users, map readers and nursing mothers behind the wheel but I say we all have to go sometime. Anyway, that's what airbags are for, right? Sometimes the unexpected can leap out and there is just no way to plan for it. One night I was driving home in the fog as only the California coast can be foggy. I was creeping along and saw taillights blinking suddenly in front of me; the car ahead was stopped in the middle of the road. I came to a halt behind it and rolled down the window. I got out and approached the car, a black Mercedes. Both front doors were wide open but there was no one there. I could hear the *tinka tink*a of the blinkers; one of the headlights was out but the other one lit up the road for a few feet. Then I heard the sound of heavy breathing, very heavy breathing. I was sure I was done for but before I could run, a splay-legged animal staggered into the dim light ahead. It was a black horse bleeding from the mouth and blowing hard. The driver of the car had wisely left his car in the middle of the road or I would have been the next one to hit the horse. The accident proved fatal to the horse and shook the driver so badly that he soon moved away as he found it too scary to drive in the fog ever again.

Driving through the southwest is fun because the people who live there are from an alternate universe. In Silicon Valley, common topics of conversation are home prices, restaurants and the latest great business ideas. In Prescott, Arizona the subjects run to roads, water,



"how about cherry bombs in the toilet?"

Indian casinos and huntin'. We knew we were around people who 'Think Different' when we saw the sign in the motel that laid down the law. Good thing we didn't bring that big ol' cottonwood stump and chop at it while we wailed away on the banjo as we had planned to. When we moseyed on over to the restaurant next door, I asked for my salad dressing on the

side. Not a problem. But when I asked if they had Diet Coke, the grizzled old waitress re-holstered her ballpoint in her dazzling beehive hairdo and said, "Are you one a those health nuts, honey?" Ya, well, maybe.

Once, in Monument Valley, Arizona, we stayed at Goulding's Lodge, which is where John Wayne and John Huston hung out when they made the movie *Stagecoach*, a movie now seen in snippets between Jeep commercials shot in the same place. This I must surmise, because we still had no TV even with three small boys. Their big treat (and mine) has always been to watch TV in a motel. That night, we checked into the lodge and went to our room. The boys were simply shocked to see that there was no TV, so they ran to the front desk and asked where it was. The clerk eyed them disapprovingly. "Boys, you are just going to have to go one night without it." They looked at him in confusion as the grandfatherly clerk suggested they play charades. They thought it would far be more interesting to burn the place to the ground.

The desk clerk did set us up with a medicine man from the Navaho Nation, though. This man took us out to the desert and we checked out collapsing mud walls and rocky gullies. We finally came to some flat rocks and he said, "We call these pancake rocks, because they look like pancakes." These people actually do *need* TV. Badly. The clerk had told us that this character might sing some of the old songs if he took a shine to us. I thought things were going along pretty well so I asked him if he celebrated the old religion. "Oh, yes I do," he said slowly. "I am considered an elder." He looked to be about 110 so this made sense. I explained that I understood that there were many fine songs that his people sang. That was true, he acknowledged, and he would be glad to sing us one. We were standing among waist-high stone walls with shards of ancient pots scattered around, pictographs painted on the walls and a desert sunset about to light up the red stone escarpment all

around us. I was all set for the real thing, and then our guide unleashed a terrifying rendition of *What a Friend We Have in Jesus*. Some medicine man. He turned out to be a Pentecostal.

Today the crossing can be pretty dull because there is very little motivation to leave the freeway, unless you are headed for the IMAX theater showing a movie of The Grand Canyon. The feeders and fuelers make the whole country look the same, but if you get off the freeway you can still find the rustic America of yore, like the section of Route 66 that has been flogged back into service for our amusement. Oatman, Nevada is on this stretch and I think of it as the Disneyland of Route 66. Oatman is an old gold mining town that has been delivered from



“heeee haw”

complete obscurity to near obscurity. We were there at noon when the thermometers burst at about 118 degrees and you could have fried a hubcap on the sidewalk. The chamber of commerce had the unusual notion that the burros that run wild in the desert were cute, and that if one was cute, a couple of hundred would be 200 times cuter. Today, these animals wander the town, fouling the place beyond

imagination. We saw a dust devil twist through and this appeared to be the principal method of street sweeping. The burro-to-tourist ratio appears to be about ten per customer so there are plenty to go around.

We retreated from the fetid streets to an equally fetid restaurant and ordered the *spécialité de la maison*: a greasy cheeseburger and pulverized potato chips. Halfway through lunch, the piano player lurched through the door and fell hard at our feet. What an entrance! He staggered to an upright piano and upended his top hat onto the lid for “con-rubushions.” He then folded his arms and waited to be paid. We were the only customers and he looked at us hard with one eye, while the other one wandered unsteadily around the room. The piano man was missing several teeth, making his grin an uncanny reflection of the piano keyboard. Even though it seemed odd that he should be paid before he played, we figured it must be an Oatman thing and hoped that we would find a hard rock mining version of David Helfgott from the movie *Shine* but instead we got a man who cruelly punished the few working keys to such a lamentable degree that we were driven back into the suffocating street. He was so desperately short of brain cells that he would

forget what song he had started and mix several together. It was instructive for the boys, though.

“That, me lads, is what’s called a rummy. Don’t let it happen to you.”

“Dad,” Tyler said, “it’s far more likely to happen to you than to us.”

Before I could cuff the rascal we saw a couple of sweaty little girls going crazy over the “cuuuuute baby donkey.” It looked like it was going to nurse and the older of the two girls swung up her Barbie Quick Shot Camera and took aim. But as the donkey sniffed beneath the tick-infested mother, it turned out to be probing dad by mistake, judging by the unexpectedly long, wet enthusiasm the larger donkey began to display from its nether regions. The girl snapped away, but the two were clearly mystified as to what was going on even if their parents were all too aware of what the glistening appendage was used for as they hustled the girls off. We were so convulsed with laughter that we started to draw stares, so we beat it to the car and wound our way slowly through the filthy donkey herd rooting through the trash on the street.

Sure, see Paris, but don’t miss Oatman.



In Oregon, we met one of the truly pivotal figures of the 20th century. Now every region likes to tout its local products. Maple syrup in Mapleton, Maine (tree blood, actually), scrapple in New Hope, Pennsylvania (scrapple is chopped-up pig snout fried in lard), and wheat in Montana. In Montana we discovered a wheat farm the size of Delaware, complete with a bakery and a restaurant. They held the world’s record from standing grain to a loaf of bread: 51 minutes. “Hu-ray, we have enough time left to go cow tipping!”

Oregonians have woodcarving and rain. Since it’s hard to make souvenirs out of rain, they use wood. “The World’s Largest Wood-Carving Emporium” had multi-storied tree houses, unicorns and burl carved into contorted, uncomfortable-looking chairs. Inside the shop, we met an amiable fellow who escorted us around the showroom. I bought a sculpture of what looked like a crocodile giving birth to a bald eagle. We



harlot angel

were about to leave when the man told us about his great claim to fame. This guy was in his '60s and claimed that he had been a basketball star in high school. Now he might have been 5'7" in thick shoes. He told us that the basketball season had been pretty long for a bunch of short kids and was going badly until he invented the *jump shot*. Rowan, who was 15 at the time, inspected him with the keen interest of a kindred spirit.

"Hey, that's great," the boy said, "because I invented something, too."

"What was that?" asked the storekeeper.

"The lap," said Rowan.

"The lap?"

"Sure. I'll show you." Rowan sat down on a wooden gargoyle throne. "See, first you're standing and no lap. Then you sit down and you have a lap."

The poor fellow furrowed his brow deeply enough for spring planting and then he clouded up and looked as if he might rain. Abruptly he said, "The store is now closed!" We were unceremoniously shown the outside of the ornately carved door.

I looked at Rowan, beaming. "How did you ever think of that?"

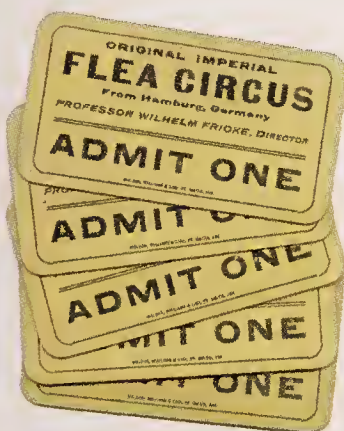
"I didn't think, I just reacted," he said. It was fantastic. I can't see anyone sitting down today without it reminding me of Rowan's perfect, deadpan delivery.

A few months later, I was listening to Susan Stamberg on National Public Radio as she was interviewing some character who, along with his teammates back in 1946, decided that they would be more successful if they jumped and shot the ball. Oh man! This guy really did invent the jump shot! I broke the bizarre news to Rowan. "Don't sweat it Dad," he responded, "I'm working on a new invention anyway. It's called the shadow. Look, see how it's hooked right to my feet." That's my boy!

Traveling is great but actually living on the road can be a trial.

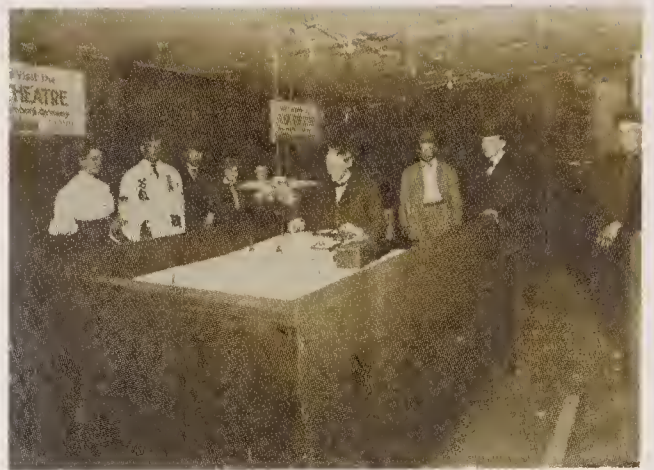
Wilhelm Fricke and the Smallest Show on Earth

One of my Roadside America treasures is the flea circus. Flea circuses were a very real thing up until about 1950. I own one given to me to me by my grandmother, the Amazing Ruth. Wilhelm Fricke was Ruth's older brother and the Fricke Flea Circus has always been my prized possession.



Most people think that flea circuses were some sort of a gag but they were actually tiny, tabletop sideshow acts. The fleas were harnessed with silver wire, finer than baby's hair, looped around their necks. The fleas were then attached in gangs

of four to tiny brass vehicles and essentially made to run for their lives. The circus consists of 12 vehicles including a buckboard, locomotive, automobile, and even a wheelbarrow, all about three-quarters of an inch long. One flea had a tiny bar fastened to his head and he would be made to walk a tightrope. Others were lashed under tiny paper cones of colorful paper and forced to dance a tarantella on a miniature dance floor at the Grand Duke's Ball.



Up to about a dozen people would gather around for the ten-minute show. Fricke would hand a big magnifying glass to the littlest kid, who would confirm that the fleas were performing all the acts just as the impresario directed. It was a tough life because the circus could never play to a very big crowd and the fleas had to be fed from Willy's arm. I have all the equipment necessary to run the circus: a lifetime supply of silver wire, hand painted posters, piles of tickets, the printing plates used to run off the flyers advertising the show; even his coronet. Willy lived a precarious existence in fleabag hotels and carnival tents with his fellow carnies, magicians and hucksters. How well I know Willy from the one small suitcase he left. It contained not just the circus but a vivid portrait of his life as a ring-master and young husband. I have Willy's birth certificate, his marriage certificate to Darla and 141 letters, which Willy wrote to his wife telling her of his life on the road between 1915 and 1917. Willy described a drive from San Diego to Seattle in an open automobile, an unimaginably long trip then. He told about his visit to a movie set in Hollywood and of the crushing loneliness of life on the road. The letters are filled with



longing but also with grand expectations for the future. The postmarks stretch from Vancouver to Miami Beach, all addressed to the same apartment in St. Louis. I have Darla's letters, too, 126 of them, tied in neat bundles by the fastidious Willy. Darla worked as a ladies' maid but studied to be a secre-

tary at night. About a year into the correspondence, her letters are suddenly typed. "Willy," she wrote, "I have a big surprise. I got the job at Schneider's and I am Mr. Schneider's sec. I make \$7 a week and I take

lunch at the lunch counter, included. I am so lucky but I miss you awfully. November is an eternity away."

Willy was home for periods of time in the winter but never for very long. They decided he would quit the road when they had saved \$300. Darla kept a running total in each of her letters. It reached \$247.50

Early in 1918 Willy went to the Great War, in Europe. The final paper is a chilly little telegram for Mrs. W. Fricke. "It is with deepest regret that I must inform you that your husband, Wilhelm Konrad Fricke, is missing in action and is presumed dead." Willy never returned from the Western Front. He had only been gone for three weeks.

A certain amount of time on the road is good for the soul. Too much though, is hard on the heart.



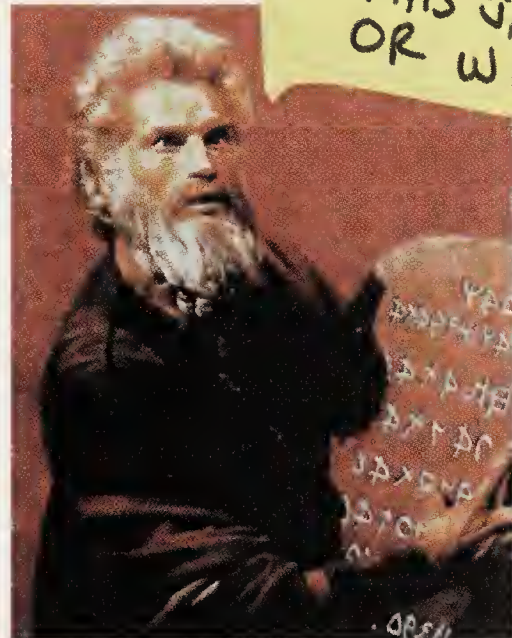
Chapter 18.

MY BUDDY TOM CRUISE & OTHER BOYZ N' THE HOOD

I've watched the Tom Cruise Effect from a front row seat and I can assure you that it is as profound and powerful as the coming of spring, the motions of the planets, or the wagging of my dog's tail. Start with the ancient game of telephone (dating at least as far back as the Old Testament, when God confused poor old Moses by masquerading as a chatty little sagebrush) and combine it with a desperate desire to be splashed with the sweat of celebrity, and the result is sweet mayhem.

One person thinks they see the image of Christ on a tortilla and pretty soon the TV trucks are parked around the house six-deep. Or a clerk at Toys "R" Us overhears a woman talking on a cell phone in the checkout line saying that she is going to Atlanta to visit her mother and by nightfall the word is out that someone has discovered Atlantis. This is The Tom Cruise Effect. And although it's mighty potent, its shelf life is fairly brief as each zany new idea is replaced by another. When Moses was in the presence of God he was pretty sure it was a big deal and when our non-sectarian gods walk among us it is equally memorable. Growing up, I used to hear Dennis Day on the Walt Disney Show sing "*When you wish upon a star...*," and the Tom Cruise Effect is just that: wishing upon a star.

Since we see so many people coming through the door at Buck's we are bound to get an A-list celebrity now and then. If you are famous nothing is more obnoxious than someone ripping out half a page of a phone book and, scrounging the nub of a pencil, asking you to be grateful for their adoration. I have a policy that the staff should never bother a famous person; they should come and get me so I can harass them. In the old days a king had office hours, but today you have to grab a star when you can.



The chef at Buck's doesn't get much of an opportunity to come out and mingle with the masses so it is up to me to bring him the news. One evening I told him that he had just missed Tom Cruise. He was on to me and thought I was kidding because I had pulled this before. He would soon change his mind. A couple of weeks later, I was in the local dry cleaner's when I heard someone say that Tom Cruise and Nicole Kidman were checking out property in Woodside. Over the next few weeks their limo was seen tooling around, presumably with them in it, looking at houses. It is as uncool to inspect property from a limo in Woodside as it is to have your horse crap on the sidewalks of Beverly Hills so these folks were going to have to get a few pointers in *savoir faire* if they were going to fit in with our country lifestyle.

Soon we discovered that they had purchased the Pond House on Mt. Home Road for \$3.2 million. This was in 1996, before the dot com frenzy drove that same property up to well over \$10 million. There was widespread speculation as to how they would fare in a town not known for its movie stars. Woodside might have more billionaires than any other town of its size but the only local movie star is Shirley Temple, and since she was big when she was a little kid she can move around without being hassled. Tom and Nicole were the reigning King and Queen of Hollywood! People started to take sides. Some were thrilled and couldn't wait to pinch avocados in Roberts Market next to Top Gun himself. The Cruises came armed with small children who people assumed would attend the local school. Maybe Tom and Nicole would join the amateur theatrics in town or perhaps, like Clint Eastwood in Carmel, one of them might run for mayor.

There was another camp, however. This was made up of the folks who had seen the neighborhood going to the dogs. We forget that in some communities the citizens decry that the public pool is closing or complain that there are too many people being gunned down on the streets. In Woodside some residents led an uprising that resulted in the first ordinances in the nation limiting house sizes to about 6,600 square feet no matter how large the land was. There was bad blood over this and now with the arrival of the 'movie people,' the neighborhood would very likely deteriorate 'up' even further. It is a bit ironic that at this same time, local home prices started their ascent to the point at which, in the year 2000, an 11-acre single-dwelling residential parcel right across the street from the Pond House sold for \$52.5 million. There was a nice barn on the property, but no house.

The frenzy over the first family of the silver screen increased until one day we were watching the news on TV in the bar when pictures of a smiling Tom and Nicole flashed onscreen with the voiceover asking:

“Are these folks moving to Woodside?” It was followed by interviews of locals expressing opinions both pro and *No Way!* Over the next couple of days, *National Enquirer* reporters scuttled around; TV trucks trolled for sightings; a news helicopter hovered in the air.

Actually we did have a couple of working movie folks in town: the director Brian De Palma and his wife Gail Ann Hurd, the producer of *Terminator II*. It seems that Gail Ann was great pals with Tom and her friends began pestering her for the latest news. She claimed to know nothing but people thought that she was just protecting their privacy. She asked me what I knew but I was completely in the dark so she decided to call Tom on the set of Stanley Kubrick's *Eyes Wide Shut*, where he and Nicole were grinding out this squalid travesty. Tom told Gail that he had heard that he and his family were supposed to be coming to Woodside. In fact, he had heard it several times. He did not, he claimed, have any intention of moving. He didn't even know where Woodside was. Now, wait a minute! They had opened a charge account at the grocery store. They had been seen by unimpeachable friends of friends. What about the parties, what about the summer softball league, what about our pictures in *Vanity Fair*? How could they back out on us like this?

Here is how: rewind to four months earlier. I'm in the kitchen and I say to the chef, “Hey, Tom Cruise was just here.” He rolls his eyes and continues dismantling a salmon. One of the waiters thinks this is a good story so he goes out and tells *one table*. Fast-forward five years, and many people have the vague notion that this famous couple lives in Woodside. It was just last year when one of my sons told me that he heard that Tom and Nicole had purchased a home on Sea Cliff Drive in Santa Cruz. “Sure,” I said, “It's their weekend getaway from Woodside.”

Sometimes the start of the TCE isn't even human. The local news



note the duck as bait

once reported that someone had called animal control to report that their black mamba was loose in the neighborhood. Now snakes generally get a bad rap, but a few have truly earned their reputations as bad boys. The black mamba is one of them. It's a big snake and can outrun, outclimb and outswim the best of us. It will chase you even if not provoked and bite you dead before you can yell, “The black mamba got me!” The fact that not even a crazy person would keep one (for long) and

that they live in Africa didn't slow down the news stories. One article even went so far as to suggest that bicyclists wear thick boots and advised that parents drive their children to school. For a few weeks it would have been rough service to be a garden hose; the police were actually called out several times to shoot them.

After a time it was determined that the snake must have gotten away clean, or is it still waiting in the weeds? They don't tape record calls to animal control and the caller preferred to remain anonymous. After a few days the story was pushed off the front page by smallpox or something and everyone forgot about the danger lurking in every drainpipe.

I think a loose mamba story would work about once a year. I'm not suggesting you try this...well, actually I *am* suggesting you try this. It's an idea with legs.

Today's Short Attention Span

Great-granddaddy would have been hugely amazed at things like AM radio, with its barrage of commercials and car wrecks, and all the rest of the incessant prattle that fills every corner of our consciousness today.

Today we are more impressed with the quantity of experience than the quality. Take woodcutting, for instance. Two hundred years ago, a frontiersman spent a good deal of time felling trees and chopping them up to build a log house. As soon as the house was done he moved on to the business of firewood and became wedded to an ax so intimately that the idea is emotionally beyond our grasp today. At most, we might cut away a 3" sapling that has blown over onto the hood of the Subaru, but back then you could really KNOW an ax. Not only was it a tool for survival but it became a metaphor for life itself. Hiram Walker Jr. said, "My Granddaddy's ax was the same ol' ax 'spite havin' three new heads and nine new handles." Today the idea of spending two hours a day cutting wood has very little appeal. We would rather watch reruns of *Saved By the Bell*.

Real people are peppered throughout this nonsense, but they have to compete toe-to-toe with the imaginary characters, assorted snakes and movie star fantasies.

Take Joe DiMaggio. A guy I knew from the gym said that he was pals with Joltin' Joe and asked if it would be all right if he brought Joe in for lunch some afternoon. "Oh great, another free lunch for some big shot. Why don't you haul along Jack Nicholson and Queen Elizabeth too?" But he said he was serious, and darned if he didn't bring Joe in a few days later. My friend Jim Messemer used to be a pro footballer with the Jets and I thought he might like to meet Joe so I invited him

too, but cautioned him, as I had been cautioned, not to mention Marilyn Monroe and *not* to bring a ball for autographing.

There were about eight of us at the table that day. Joe was everything you could want him to be as he regaled us with baseball stories for two hours. He told us how he had been a rising star with the Yankees and was becoming something of a box office draw during that time, and felt that he should be paid more money. Back in those days, Joe told us, dealing with the management was very formal and so he sent a letter requesting a raise. The muckety-mucks wrote back and told him to forget it. Joe's pal, the perennially crusty Ty Cobb, saw the response letter and persuaded Joe to let him write a much pushier letter and sign Joe's name to it. Cobb was known as a belligerent guy, used to getting his way and he guaranteed Joe that the management would knuckle under.

Joe got an immediate response saying in essence, "absolutely no raise, and stop having Ty Cobb write your letters for you!"

Rowan, who was about 12 at the time, got out of school early to come by and meet Joe. I had taught Rowan a joke so old that it made no sense to him but he delivered it to Joe, more or less intact, with a straight face.

Talking Dog?

A guy walks into a bar with a dog under his arm, puts the dog on the bar and announces that the dog can talk. The guy claims to have \$10 he's willing to bet anyone who says the dog can't talk. The bartender quickly takes the bet and the owner looks at the dog and asks, "What's the thing on top of this building that keeps the rain from coming inside?" The dog answers, "ROOF." The bartender says, "Who are you kidding? I'm not paying." The dog's owner says, "How about double or nothing and I'll ask him something else." The bartender agrees and the owner turns to the dog and asks, "Who was the greatest ballplayer of all time?" The dog answers with a muffled, "RUTH." With that the bartender throws them out the door. As they bounce down the sidewalk the dog looks at his owner and says, "Maybe I should have said DiMaggio?"

Joe had heard the joke a million times but probably never had it been so badly mangled in the telling. He punched Rowan on the arm and laughed good-naturedly. After lunch Joe posed for pictures and, of course, Messemmer whipped out a ball. Joe signed it graciously but now we make Jim sit at the kids' table when he comes in. At least he didn't mention Marilyn.

A few weeks later I overheard two older women discussing baseball and I sat down with them and mentioned that I recently had lunch with

the legendary Joe DiMaggio. I proceeded to repeat Joe's story about Ty Cobb. One of the women said she had heard that story before. Her father had told it to her. She was Ty Cobb's daughter and said that that was one of the few nice stories about him.

Because we're in Silicon Valley, not all of our household names are as well known outside the hood, but around here, some of the giants are known as The Lawgivers. These are people who have discovered certain principles of commerce that have proven to be so durable over time that they are called laws. Gordon Moore gets credit for Moore's Law, which states that our ability to compute doubles every 18 months. He said this decades ago as founder of Intel and it is a hallmark of the age. Metcalfe's Law tells us that the power of computing increases exponentially as more nodes are connected. Simple, almost dull even. Like gravity.



pancake guy and bob metcalfe



pancake guy, gordon moore and andy grove

Woodside is just a sleepy little town where nothing ever happens except for the occasional bank robbery. I think the reason the stick-up men choose our bank is because of the name, Wells Fargo, and the rustic old building. It's just itching to be knocked over because it looks like a movie set so robbers get confused as to which reality they're in. Or maybe it's because it's the only bank in town and they just don't want to drive very far. That was certainly the case when a guy came in a few years ago with a mask and said stick-um' up. The teller handed over a bag of cash. The robber ran out to the parking lot, but his mask slipped, so he took it off just as Rich and Cheryl Alfano drove in.

"Hi, Sal," Rich said, "how's it going?" It turns out that Sal used to be Rich's babysitter. "What are you doing?" Rich kidded. "Robbing the bank?"

"I gotta go!" Sal said, and sped off down the road. Then the bag

exploded (“Oh heck, I should have asked them to give me the money in a *non-exploding bag!*”). The whole inside of the car was covered in paint and shredded one-dollar bills. By the time the guy pulled into his apartment building two miles from the bank, there were a dozen police cars behind him. Sal later told the judge that rent had gotten so high that he *had* to rob the bank. Of course, his rent has since dropped considerably.

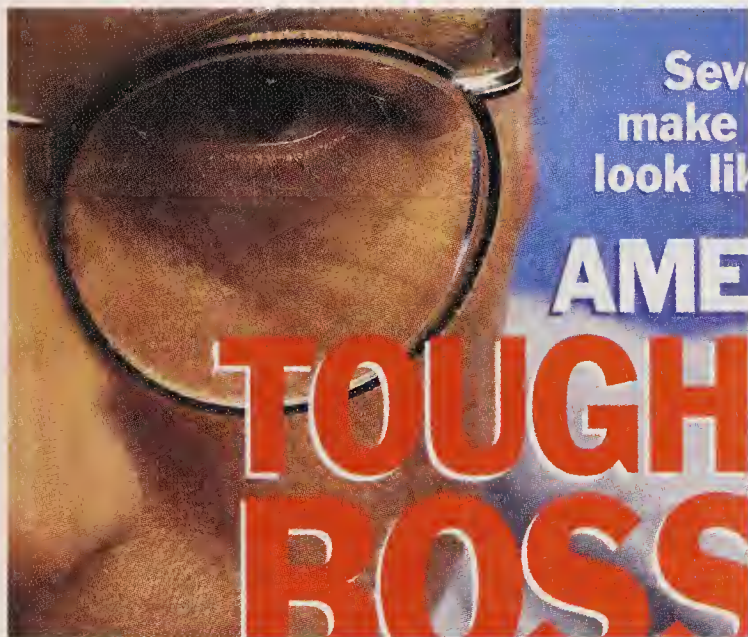


“bank robbing, bad!”

Drooling psychopath?

One Saturday around noon, I was running the espresso machine in the bar at Buck’s when I witnessed one of the cornerstone events that anchor my unstable little universe. I only put the details together later, but here is how it happened.

T.J. Rodgers is the outspoken founder of Cypress Semiconductor.



His firm manufactures boring little computer chip thingies, but the man himself is anything but boring. In fact, *Fortune Magazine* took a shine to the boy, put him on the cover and called him the toughest boss in America.

psychopath or just misunderstood?

T.J. had a long-standing practice of running from his Woodside home at the edge of town and jogging right up to the bar at Buck’s, where he and his long time honey-

pie, Valeta Massey, would upend about six Diet Cokes while flipping through the movie section of the paper together. Then off they would go to see a matinee.

One morning he came in steaming from his run. Four guys were sitting right next to the bar holding the magazine in which T.J. was quoted as saying (about his business competitors) that he intended to “rape their women, burn their villages and dance on the bones of their children.” The author of the piece referred to T.J. as a “drooling psychopath.” This line upset T.J., because he said he doesn’t drool. I know from personal experience that he doesn’t do any of those other things, either, but the



this is their real hair

quote does have a way of focusing one's attention.

One of the men holding the magazine jabbed his finger at the page and said, "Can you believe what this little bastard said?" These men all used to work with T.J. at another company and they actually *were* the competition. It was at that precise moment that T. J. walked by. T. J. glued his sweaty face to the man's ear and dug his powerful thumbs into the poor fellow's shoulders "Be careful," he whispered. "The little bastard could be anywhere."

Residential real estate in Woodside has become sort of like soccer fans in Brazil: simply nuts. More than one house has been built recently in the \$100 million range. With that, you get some special stuff like careful attention to *feng shui*. Real estate agents, architects and decorators who otherwise seem like normal people have to bend to this arcane method of presenting a house. If the entry door faces the wrong way or the house plants are the wrong shape it can give a house bad karma. Some of the agents actually put little notes in their ads that they are "feng shui savvy."

All cultures have their rituals. I once asked an Arapaho Indian why it was their custom to always have the tipi door facing east. He told me that it was because that is where the sun rises and it is warmer on that side of the tipi in the morning. With feng shui, no one seems to know why this or that arrangement of garden gates will bring peace and prosperity or why a misplaced umbrella stand will turn the kids into tattoo-covered, ecstasy-popping freaks.

When I was a builder we all marveled at one peculiar house that was constructed entirely of concrete, inside and out, with pairs of 12-foot-high walnut doors between every room. Years after it was built it came on the market. The real estate agent told me that he was scheduled to show it to a wealthy industrialist from China, but that it was probably a waste of time because, although the house was spectacular, the fact that the previous owner had tied weights to himself and jumped into the pool was the very worst feng shui possible. Apparently, a stunt like this makes a house uninhabitable for all time by a Chinese home buyer.

A couple of weeks later I asked the agent if the guy had freaked out when he heard about the suicide but he said no. In fact, the guy bought the house. It turns out that there is a little-known amendment to the feng shui code that if the deal is good enough, a few bodies in the pool don't count.

In Harm's Way

Harmon Beauregard was a scabby old codger when I first met him in Woodside in the mid '80s. He had stopped cutting his hair back

when he saw how unsettled The Establishment became when the Beatles showed up with their mop-tops. Harm was no John Lennon, but he was every bit as unique a character. I would love to have had Von Trapp, Harm and my grandfather all together in the same room. All of them had odd, compelling senses of humor and none of them was like anyone else I had ever met. Someone had given Harm's wife, Alice, my phone number, thinking I was a handyman who would come and rescue their toilet, which had fallen through the bathroom floor. At the time, I was remodeling mansions in Atherton and just a little beyond the crashed-toilet phase of my career. But I went to see them anyway, because they sounded as desperate as you might imagine. Their house was a big country ramble, which needed more than just a toilet fixed.

I rigged the toilet in a workable fashion but I could see that the decrepit old house and the Beauregards were in a dead heat for the finish line and it was anybody's guess which of them would fall over first. You've heard of packrats but actually seeing them in action is a vision not to be missed. Harm and Alice had lived in the place for about 40 years and I am confident that they still had everything that they had ever bought. There were the classic stacks of newspapers and magazines looming threateningly from every corner. The furniture was new *in 1950* and sorely needed a good bonfire. There was a dust-covered loom with a half-finished weaving of John and Robert Kennedy frozen around the chin line. There were dry aquariums with sunken ships and unconvincing pirate loot spilling out of broken plaster treasure chests on the sand. In this dank place, books gave off the musty smell of a rarely opened grave.

It seemed that so much of what Harm told me could not be possible. I thought that he was in the throes of dementia at first but in his 80s he was still as sharp the tacks that littered the floor of his workshop. After spending a little bit of time with him, I realized that everything he said was true. The faded photo of a boy in knickers with an ear-to-ear grin, holding his cap on the steps of the White House, really was him. Harm had won a national science award and in the picture he is shaking the hand of the Rough Rider himself, President Teddy Roosevelt.

Harm became an inventor later in life. Most of his inventions were, as he said, "bout as useless as tits on a boar hog." He had some gizmos involving mechanical ratchets and sprockets but all I remember are the wacky ones. In the late 1950s he peddled The Gender Calculator. It consisted of a test strip like a pregnancy tester that would reveal to a pregnant woman the sex of her child. He sold it through magazines for \$19.95. If the test turned out to be incorrect, the deal offered a full refund. Since the test strip was preprinted with 'boy' he was correct half of the time. Apparently it sold fairly well, and

few people asked for the refund because even the word 'pregnant' back then was practically obscene.

He built a device he called the Genuflector for his wife, Alice. Basically it was a pair of polio leg braces, which he had spring loaded so the wearer could rise and fall with ease when kneeling in prayer at a church service. Alice gave it up after trying to stagger out of the pew and up the aisle a few times. Harm's biggest idea, for which he had several prototypes and patents, was the Pogomuter. It was a man-sized pogo stick to be used for "those short trips into town." "Fast, easy to park and uses no fuel," said the ad copy. It was the Segway Personal Transporter of its day, but like the Segway it is still waiting to take off. I tried one of the sticks. Calling it a stick was a misnomer; it resembled a jackhammer in weight and flexibility. In about three jumps, your skeleton had either turned to jelly or you had mercifully landed in a ditch. It was efficient for emptying everything out of your pockets, though.

During WWII Harm found himself working on the Norton Bomb Site. He was also a flight engineer for Howard Hughes. "I flew at least 25 times with that maniac," he told me. "I had to pull Howard's bloodied face out of the console of a crashed plane in Santa Monica. We had to get him cleaned up so he could have dinner with one of his dames, Rita Hayworth or Jane Russell. One of them."

I returned the next day to work on the bathroom. After I finished, Harm and I sat in exhausted chintz chairs and watched a couple of their many cats work the patches of sun that had muscled their way through the dingy glass. Alice brought us tea in equally dingy cups. Harm told me that, as a young man, he had been sent from New Jersey by his boss Tom to Hollywood to be the fix-it guy for movie projectors. He kept referring to Tom as if I would know who that was. Alice explained that it was Tom Edison. Eventually Harm became a cinematographer and even had bit parts in the movies. He had a few scratchy old movie stills and gave me one. It was from *Mutiny on the*



Bounty on which he was an extra. He was exceedingly proud of his big moment, even if it was a bit hard to identify him in the shot.

He was more successful as a cinematographer than as an actor. He was on the team that won the Academy Award in 1932 for cinematography in *Shanghai Express* starring Marlene Dietrich. "I have it around here somewhere," Harm said, "Alice, where is that little Oscar?" She said she didn't know. I expressed a real interest in the little guy but they couldn't find it. As I left Harm asked me what I owed him for the floor repair. I said it was on the house. We searched the statement for a good pun but

finding none he said, "I'll tell you what. When I find that little Oscar I'll give it to you."

It never did turn up, but I do have one of his Pogomuters and that beats all.



Chapter 19.

THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN ICELAND & RUSSIA

I grew up believing that the Russians were out to bomb me to bits. In kindergarten, we would have art time cutting out paper Santa Clauses and, after putting away our blunt little scissors and paste, we would move right into a ‘duck and cover’ drill. We curled into balls like roly-poly bugs beneath our desks, keeping our heads away from the windows so the nuclear blast wouldn’t rip our faces off. Then it was time for graham crackers and a nap. Anyone would need a nap after that. Those of us lucky enough to survive a nuclear bombing would be found stumbling through the rubble as the radiation quickly reduced us to zombies while we fought over cans of waxed beans and maraschino cherries, the graham crackers long since exhausted. Today, though, I think Russians are lots of fun.

Good old Uncle Sam and The Evil Empire piled on so many weapons that finally the Russians squealed “Uncle Vanya” and tossed in the towel. But we have never been a country that stopped building doomsday machines just because we were winning, so we kept up the race for several more years even when there was no one else left in the game. Most of our stuff more or less functioned (the B70 and the Star Wars defense notwithstanding) but much of what the Russians spent so many hard earned rubles on could not possibly have worked, even right out of the box. If we had just sent someone over there to have a look at the way the place was built it would have been obvious that there was less chance of them actually getting their missile silo doors open than teaching a chinchilla the cha cha. The idea that they could have induced missiles to fly from Siberia to the U.S., then separate into half a dozen MIRV’s, each accurately targeted at a city near you, is now quite funny. Exceedingly funny. But funny in a Russian sense.

Russian joke:

“How does a Russian do business?”

“He steals a crate of vodka to sell so he can buy vodka.”

Russian humor is generally sad and should probably not even be called humor. At the conclusion of a Russian joke you don’t laugh, but rather just sigh and shake your head at the futility of life.

Russia is broken. From what I have seen, it has been broken for a very long time. The primary reason for this is that Russians hate work.

There is a saying in Russia that "If things are as bad as they can be, they will only get worse." In most countries you work and you get paid. In Russia you work and get nothing and everybody thinks you're a fool for making any effort at all. As a result, the best stuff is crap and the bad stuff is completely unusable. But Russia is still cool. Compared to Iceland, Russia is a cultural paradise. Let's have a look.

Recipe to make Iceland (serves 288,000):

- Take one large, black rock, and place it miles from nowhere.
- Cover it with snow.
- Add Norwegians, fish and money.
- Remove even the tiniest shred of personality.
- Freeze until solid.

Schoolchildren will tell you that Iceland is green and Greenland is icy. It's true that Greenland was indeed an early real estate scam and is covered with ice but so is Iceland, except for about 20 minutes in the summer when the rocks poke through the snow. I visited there with Rowan and Tyler. Traveling with the boys is always worth it no matter where we go. If I say: "Stand back from the geyser!" they run up to the rim and get scalded. They lean dangerously over the edge of waterfalls and dip into molten fondue. In Reykjavík they discovered slot machines and squandered all their pocket change. Two days in Iceland is great. Unfortunately, we stayed three.

Almost no one has a last name in Iceland. In the phone book, your name is listed with your first name, town and profession. I saw about 2,000 'Björn, Reykjavík, fisherman' listings. There are no bugs, crime, pollution or lines in stores. They celebrate a strange pagan religion, the worship of Boiling Water. They keep the peat fires burning beneath an image of a glorious Viking past that has been conveniently scrubbed of its violent underpinnings. Know what the Vikings did for a living? They ran around wearing cow-horn hats, killing people and selling women into slavery. They also peddled narwhal tusks. These are whale tusks, which they marketed as unicorn horns. What an angle! In the Middle Ages, pulverized unicorn horn had the dual properties of being an aphrodisiac and, when sprinkled on food, a poison detector, so it was in great demand by the royalty of the region. We used to think the Pet Rock guy was a genius but he was a piker compared to the Vikings.

Today the most exciting thing to do in Iceland is to check out the many six-foot-high piles of rocks that the Vikings made for fun in about 1000 AD. You might find it hard to believe, but after 1,000 years of history most of the Icelandic people ever born are still alive. It's true. The grand total of Icelanders ever born has not exceeded half a million. Today there are 288,000 of them, so over half are still alive. In



boys inspect popular tourist crack in iceland of despair and are keeling over from ennui.

Russia, in 1990, the average lifespan of a man was 69. Today it's 59, so by far most of the Russians are dead. People think it's the vodka, but the vodka has been around for a long time. Russians are continually strip-mining whole new vistas

I'll bet you can't name more than one famous character from Iceland. Well, there's the singer Björk, Leif Ericson (the Greenland real estate huckster), Snow White (she was the wife of the Disney animator and very well known in Iceland for going big time in Hollywood, sort of), and Free Willy. Willy is originally from the waters south of the airport at Keflavík. A few years ago Craig McCaw (Buck's customer, American billionaire) decided to pay to have the whale sent home after his stint as a movie star. Craig also agreed to foot the bill for Willy's go-back-to-the-wild lessons and they lodged Willy in a cove on an island. Willy knew a cushy deal when he saw one and even after they took the net down he would not leave the cove where Craig was buying him three squares a day. Craig lost \$10 billion when the telecom markets collapsed and he had to cut back, so he sent word to Willy that he had flipped him his last herring and that Willy had better get a J-O-B. The later Free Willy movies were made with robots, so there really are no jobs for killer whales (except for actually going out and killing things). The Icelandic government had to take over the job of feeding Willy. They think this is as good an idea as feeding a sewer rat; there is no whale romance in Iceland, where more than one hapless Willy has ended up in the chop suey. But the Icelandic PR Corps knew that if they let him starve, pictures of a skinny Willy panhandling in the streets of Reykjavík would keep the dozen or so tourists from coming to see the rock piles. Finally, Willy took a walk and was last seen in Norway, bumming smokes from fishing boats and finally died from lung cancer.

Wendy McCaw

Wendy McCaw used to be married to Craig McCaw, the guy who vacuumed up half the cell phone spectrum and instantly had a book value equal to the GNP of Germany. In '97 Wendy and Craig split up. She tied the record (Guinness 1999) set in 1982 by Adnan (international

weapons dealer) Khashoggi's wife, Soraya, for the largest divorce settlement in history. Either by coincidence or design Wendy and Soraya share a property line on the cliffs overlooking the ocean in Santa Barbara. I can picture them hanging on the fence sipping Johnnie Walker Black out of 18th-century Baccarat and gloating over the take as they hurl their empty glasses at the onlookers on the beach below. Or maybe they hurl the glasses for another reason. Wendy was incensed that the rabble feels free to actually wander along the sand and rinse their unwashed children in her ocean. So she sued the citizenry of California to make them stop. Even though she bought the property knowing full well that California law gives the beach to the people, and that the property above the high tide line to the cliffs is a deeded easement on her title, she has spent considerable time trying to get the law changed.

Santa Barbara is a small town, and the press should be coming down on her with both feet, but since she bought the local paper you have to go out of town to read about it. Poor Wendy. The word got out anyway and now the premier spot to drop trou and crank up the ghetto blaster is right in front of her house.

The reason I'm needling her is because she never calls her parents, who happen to be good friends of mine. Wendy, when you read this, call your mother!

There is so little going on in Iceland that one roadside attraction was a gas station/school/restaurant/infirmarium/museum, all in one. The principal exhibits in the museum are a stuffed cat and a stuffed dog. For this we paid a dollar each? The town also has two colleges. At one they teach gymnastics; at the other, cooking. In Iceland, during the 20-minute summer, they really do leave their babies in unattended strollers in front of the downtown stores. They have a jail in Reykjavík but crime is so rare that they generally close it at 5 p.m. and send the prisoners home for the night.



"look, a free baby!"

We met the President of Iceland (he and my wife were at university together) and he very kindly showed us the sights and even took us to the airport. As a memento, he sent me a narwhal tusk, which I have in Buck's. It's practically a capital crime to import as much as a marine mammal fingernail today, but he sent it by diplomatic pouch. It is technically still the property of the Icelandic people. I nibble on the end every now and then and it seems to be working.

I much prefer Russia. Given the choice between Iceland's slick coffee shops, spotless sidewalks and books in seven languages—or being harangued in Russian by hysterical old lady fishmongers with multiple warts on their noses, I'll take the warts every time.

Russia is full of adventure. Rowan and Tyler and I were walking through downtown St. Petersburg when we heard a loud cracking sound behind us. We turned to see a twenty-foot section of concrete balcony fall from the fourth floor of an apartment building and shatter on the sidewalk where we had just been standing. You'd never see that in Reykjavik.

We stayed at the appropriately named Sovietski Hotel, which resembled an unconverted prison. It's a gray concrete box half a block long with 60-grit toilet paper and bath towels designed for drying tiny dogs. In the dining room we had our choice of meat or fish, but "ve out fisch."

"Oh, well then. I guess I'll have meat then."

What Was So **Great** About Peter The ?

St. Petersburg was founded in 1705 by Peter the Great and named, as was he, for his patron saint. The story of Peter the Great is as big as the man himself (6'7"). He has aptly been called the Thomas Jefferson of Russia as he single-handedly dragged Russia out of being a medieval Asian land of mystery to a major European power. When Peter took up the reins Russia did not have even one seagoing ship, no reliable roads west, and, in fact, not much communication within the country itself.

When Peter was 13 he found a rotting sailboat in a shed next to the Moscow River and, working with an old carpenter, he rebuilt the boat and taught himself to sail. By the time he was 20 he embarked on the conquest of the Turkish port at Azov on the Black Sea with his eye to opening a sea route to Europe. He eventually built a fleet on the Black Sea, but the Turks proved too tough to whip so he directed his efforts to the north, establishing St. Petersburg a few miles up the Neva River from the Baltic. He installed the navy there primarily to challenge the Swedes, who were then the major power in Eastern Europe. Peter battled them for over 20 years before he finally drove them back to Sweden.

Peter traveled to the West and rounded up German generals, Polish ironworkers, Dutch shipwrights, and Italian architects. He eventually taught himself 18 different technical trades. The artisans flooded into St. Petersburg and built a new city along the river. So many died in its construction that for years it was called the City of Bones. When he had trouble getting stonemasons to move north he simply forbade masonry construction in the rest of Russia, and they were forced to go where the work was. He pulled the city up from a swamp with the



josh has the situation well in hand
at peter's house

sheer force of his personality. He made the nobles move there, kicking and complaining all the way from Moscow. He had the city laid out in a careful grid by his French engineers and networked by canals, sort of like Venice, but with 10 feet of snow. His Winter Palace, The Hermitage, rivaled Versailles. The summer palace he built for his wife, Catherine the First, sits

in Pushkin 20 miles from town, a gaudy layer cake painted bright blue, with gilded onion domes. It is four times bigger than the White House.

During WWI the Communists changed the name of St. Petersburg to Petrograd (Peter's City). After Lenin died in 1924 it was changed to Leningrad, then back to St. Petersburg in the 1990s. The oldest parts of Moscow date back to 1200, so St. Petersburg is relatively new and since WWII it has largely been rebuilt. Stalin was in power during the War and it is hard to imagine a leader who was more inept or morally corrupt.

Since the founding of the city, the pivotal event has been WWII. The Nazis had a non-aggression pact with Stalin and even though the Germans had obviously been preparing to invade, Stalin steadfastly refused to believe they would attack. When they did, they aimed their entire thrust at Leningrad. Hitler wanted to knock out the manufacturing there and toss Russia back into Asia, keeping the Ukraine for himself. In the late '30s Stalin shot or exiled to Siberia 80 percent of the countries' top and mid-level managers of farms, factories, universities and the military brass, too. When the war started he refused to discuss it for two weeks and by that time over half of the Russian army was gone or disabled. The leaders in St. Petersburg dug trenches, made Molotov cocktails and covered the entire downtown in camouflage. They hunkered down for nearly three years and turned the Nazis back a scant 10 miles from town. They lost over a million and a half of their citizens in doing so. Today, Stalin has been erased from the consciousness of Russia.



cathy the great's house

There is another grim reality facing this and other Russian cities and that is the economic collapse of the country. The main occupation of the St. Petersburgians seems to be snow removal and feeling gloomy. This is a city where you can't get a hair transplant, a polo pony or a golf game. In one of the public markets on the edge of the White Sea I saw an old woman with only two toy trucks for sale, both missing their wheels, placed atop a broken table. Next to her was a dimly-lit light bulb kiosk. You could buy a working light bulb for three rubles or a burned out bulb for one ruble. In Russia dead light bulbs are immediately reincarnated. The idea is that you switch a working bulb for a dead one of the same make and model at work, and you take home a nice semi-new one. On Monday, if anyone bothers to show, they hit the switch and *voila!* nothing. It might be a dead bulb or it could just as easily be that the powerline to the town has been stolen.



"damn, I wanted to play the saxophone"

The first time I went to Russia was because NASA turned me down. Snubbed me, actually. One day I woke up and realized that I needed a space suit for display at Buck's. A friend of mine was a very senior fellow at NASA and since I had once helped put some fizz into his fizzled startup company I figured he would be happy to do me the favor of stealing a space suit from the Ames Facility at Moffett Field. He said he would try and to his credit he did manage to get me one on *loan* for two weeks. Loan schmoan! I never borrow when an outright gift would be better but it seems that these space suits cost a couple of million each and they are in such demand that there are actually three companies cranking out reproductions for movies and museums.

OK fine, I'll go to Russia. Everything is for sale in Russia. Some years before I had inquired of the foreign ministry if they would consider selling Lenin's body. I wrote to Uri Yevteshenko, then the Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs, and told him that I represented a consortium that was prepared to offer something in the high six figures for the body of the Father of Modern Communism. I got a very nice letter back from Uri telling me that they would not consider such a sale,

and requesting that I write back and explain what I meant by “high six figures.” With such creative thinking, Uri is now most likely the head of some productive private enterprise in Moscow, like a casino or a hit squad.

But I’m getting ahead of myself. One morning at Buck’s a friend of mine asked me to come over to greet a large party of scowling men. She was with four blue-jean clad Russians, including General Nicolai Ivashov, the head of the Russian Army. They were hanging out with the former Secretary of Defense, Bill Perry, and so I sat down with them. Behind the general I spied the Civil Defense fallout shelter sign that I had installed over the door to the kitchen. We used to have signs all over America to warn us about this very same man and his pals. I had to restrain myself from yelling, “Incoming pancakes, duck and cover!” but since they were too big to get under the table (and would have spilled food everywhere), I let it go.

I asked General Ivashov what the head of the Russian Army



russian generals

actually does on a day-to-day basis. He playfully poked me on the chest with a stubby finger and said, “I’m the one who put the pins in the map!”

Wow! I was having breakfast with a shabbily dressed Darth Vader wannabe. I didn’t

have the heart to tell him that we figured out long ago that they were wasting their money on those pins. If they had ever pushed the button they would have been lucky if the console didn’t explode. Except for telling me that he was in charge of targeting us for annihilation he was perfectly charming. Handing me his card, he told me to look him up if I was ever in Moscow.

About six months later, my friend Josh Shade and I showed up at The Hotel President in Moscow on a frigid February day. I thought I would try to prevail upon the general to beat his swords into plowshares by giving me a space suit as a way to promote world peace. We didn’t have an appointment, but we barged into his office and attempted to communicate with the young guard at the front desk. He had a handgun, a full set of pimples, and a uniform two sizes too big. He was baffled by our impossible request to see the general but clearly wowed when I

flashed the card. A man in a uniform only about one size too large came downstairs and told us that the general was not in town and that we should not let the door hit us on our way out. That afternoon we read in the English language *Moscow Times* that General Ivashov was way down south in their version of Dixie putting the pins in the Chechnyans and wouldn't be back for dinner.

One of the reasons I love Russia is that everyone pretends to be permanently pissed off. This is such a contrast to California, where people smile for no apparent reason. In Russia there are actually rules against unnecessary smiling. If you tried to smile for a passport photo they would assume you were mocking their authority and they wouldn't take the picture. You occasionally see examples of good cheer (usually attributed to being drunk) but there is no denying the fact that there is more unhappiness per square foot in Russia than in most other places in the world.

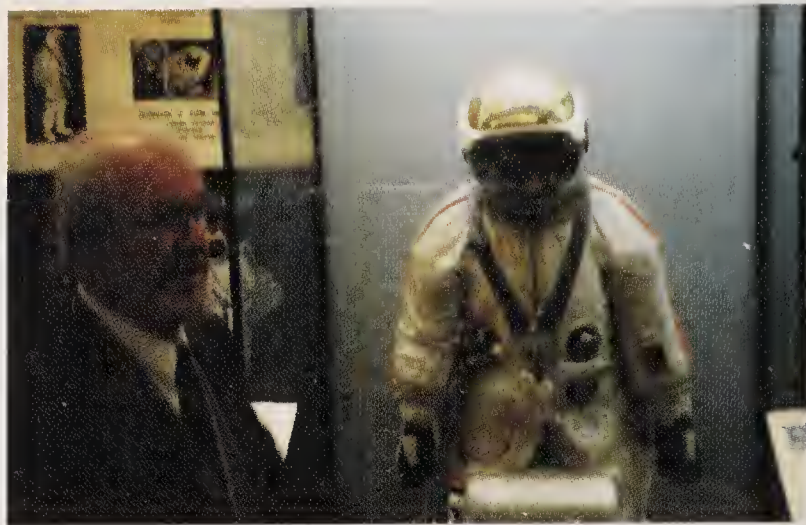
The food is terrifically bad in Russia. Double dealing and criminal activity are endemic. Stepping off the curb is best left to your stunt double. In this Wild West atmosphere, money talks. In fact, it yodels like a Swiss cowboy on methedrine, so finding a space suit was just a matter of locating the plant and making an offer. I knew an American businessman in Moscow, Alan Kaplan, who headed up the US/Russia Investment Company. He found out where the space suits were made and set us up with a translator who was also an authentic rocket scientist. In Russia, most men are rocket scientists.

Alan's firm was a venture that our government cooked up to help bring an honest entrepreneurial spirit to Russia. The problem was that our style of business disallows payoffs, which in Russia clock in at 50 to 100 percent of the deal, so Americans have real trouble doing business there. Practically everyone you deal with is a crook or worse. I know, you're thinking that this is a pretty blanket indictment but I am not exaggerating. Alan had worked out a deal to rescue a porcelain factory from bankruptcy in St. Petersburg. The factory was founded by Peter the Great's granddaughter hundreds of years ago. His firm put up several million dollars and the company was saved. Hurray! Alan was to take a seat on the board and place people in management but what they got instead was changed door locks and "Thanks for the money. *Dos vedanya*, pardner."

Josh, the translator and I drove to the Zvezda Space Agency on the outskirts of Moscow. The snow was about five feet deep and we had real difficulty locating the front of the complex. We shoveled our way to the entrance and after some banging, a little speak-easy door set in the main door slid open and our translator told a man with suspicious

little eyes that the Americans wanted to buy a space suit. The guard told us to wait and returned after a few minutes and said "Come back tomorrow." Wait a minute, I've seen this movie!

The next day we returned and were met by a very cordial fellow, whom we discovered was a pioneer in space suit design and had fitted



geezer and gagarin's suit

Uri Gagarin, the first man in space, with his suit back in the late 1950s. I explained that I was a friend of General Ivashov's and that it was he who had suggested I deal with them directly because he was busy giving those pesky Chechnyans what for. They were pretty impressed by the General's card and desperately wanted to keep it but I was getting the impression that it would be a good idea to hold onto it. They showed me a suit that looked good to me; it came complete with a dummy inside. They floated out the figure of \$20,000 and I sneered like a seasoned Russian space suit collector. After a tour of the facility, I told them that I would get back to them the following day.

That afternoon we were wandering around the open-air marketplace near the stadium the Russians built for the 1992 Olympics, the one we boycotted because of some war or another. We were taking pictures of the beef cuts (which curiously had a good deal of hide and fur still attached) and ill-conceived North Korean tennis shoes when two policemen marched up to us and asked us to come with them to the precinct right next door.

At the station there were a half-dozen officers having a dull lunch of pickled cabbage, carrots and brown bread. Wow, I thought, lunch with the locals. A few autographs and...no, actually they wanted to shake us down. Oooh, machine guns! I'm so scared. Josh and I have been shaken down plenty of times and we are familiar with the procedure so I said to him, "Let's make a deal so we can get out of here." Now Josh is far crazier than I am; he has been picked up by the police or chased by angry mobs in places like Afghanistan and Tibet. He once hitchhiked across the Sahara with his wife and I mean all the way from Ghana, thorough Timbuktu to Morocco. The locals squatted alongside them all the way just waiting to snatch the stuff off their dried remains but they made it and now Josh was here with me in an overheated police station in Moscow, surrounded by a half a dozen despondent, underpaid men in funny hats holding automatic weapons.

I demanded, in English, that they send for the manager as we were

very unhappy with the caliber of service. Our guide started to quiver and refused to translate. Then I insisted that they sell us priceless Russian icons, cheap, which we would smuggle out under our habits as we planned to escape from Russia dressed like nuns. Josh found this funny, but our guide was about to cry so I stopped goofing with the guards and said we wanted to contribute to the Policemen's Benevolent Society. I tried to hand the guy with the largest moustache five bucks. The guy swung his Kalashnikov in my direction menacingly and said he didn't want our money. Josh put his finger against the barrel and pushed it away from my chest.

This cop loudly demanded we give him our camera and all of our film. Shaking my head I said, "*nyet, nyet, nyet.*" This displeased the commandant a good deal and his face became borscht red with post-Communist hostility. After a hurried conference with his deputies he said he would settle for the film and held out his hand. Josh shook it heartily and looking into the man's menacing blue eyes, Josh explained to him that we were tired of this nonsense and would be going. If he didn't like it he could just call our buddy, Nicolai, and with that Josh suggested that I show them the general's card. The effect was completely predictable. Flashing the card was like stepping on a Claymore mine in a cotton field. The commandant, who only seconds before was a well-armed, big city, tough guy, suddenly turned into a meek little village lad. In stricken horror, he beseeched us not to have them all executed for being so thoughtless and apologized with profound sincerity. Keep in mind that this in a country where rudeness is the state religion. We laughed good naturedly, pretending it was all in good fun and Josh snatched a sour carrot off one of their plates. In the doorway Josh turned, raised his camera, and shot them. Later we found out that the police were there to protect the criminals and that they thought our film might be evidence of their illegal activities.

The following day on the phone we settled on \$12,000 for the space suit. That might seem like a lot, but you should see what they go for stateside. Actually Zvezda isn't supposed to let space suits fall off the back of the truck so I actually made a 'donation' to the Russian people on behalf of peace and friendship and to thank them for not blowing me to bits as a kid. They insisted that I sign a document promising that I would never use the suit for space travel. Since it was designed for a cosmonaut who was 5 feet tall, I thought that would be an acceptable clause. When the suit came through U.S. Customs the inspector asked if I had anything to declare and I said no. The large bulge made by the helmet seemed to pique his interest and on inspection he discovered the suit. "How much did you pay for this?" I said it was a gift and I guess

it seemed unlikely that I had actually paid for such an item and he just let me go.

On my next trip to Russia I felt pretty cocky so I moved even higher up the potential food chain. A few months previously, I had hosted a TV interview at Buck's with the president of the Radisson Hotel chain. When I mentioned that I was on my way to Russia once more, he graciously offered to put us up in Moscow. Again, I was in pursuit of peace, goodwill and Russian comedy so I made the newly elected President Putin my next target. I wrote to the President and sent him a case of Woodside Vineyards Cabernet along with a picture of us at the beach waving and holding a sign that read, "We love you Vladimir." I asked him to be sure to include Buck's in his itinerary when he came out West. I told him that I would like to bring him a couple of the latest Apple G4 Titanium laptops for his kids (knowing full well that they would use them for the pin-in-map program). The Russians get very excited about titanium since they have most of it (we have nearly all the world's helium, which I use a lot more of than titanium, so once again, we win). They used about half of their titanium supply to erect a 120-foot-tall statue of Uri Gagarin and it is the only thing I saw in Russia that wasn't rusty or chipped.

Now Putin is an interesting character. He was head of the KGB so it makes sense that he would move up, considering who he had on his side, but his origins are almost Lincolnesque. Putin's father was Stalin's barber. Of course Harry Truman used to be a hat salesman, but in Russia it's all about who you know. Stalin killed just about anyone around him who had any talent because he was a paranoid maniac but the one person he trusted was the guy who scraped his neck with a straight razor every day.

I returned in the summer of 1999 with my lads Rowan and Tyler. First we hit the hot spots in St. Petersburg: the nude beach at the foot of the Fort of St. Peter and Paul, which reminded us of an elephant seal breeding ground (ugh, the smell of roasting flesh), the prison where they toss coded messages of burning paper out the upper windows like Apaches (frightening) and a maternity hospital that we all agreed was the single filthiest place we had ever seen (truly horrifying.)

We rode the local buses and trains where we were elbowed by little old ladies and coughed on by tubercular drunks. On one train a young woman came down the aisle and started screaming at the top of her lungs while holding up a fist full of band-aids. Then *poof*, she was gone. It looked as if she was selling them but we found out that she was just advertising them. I guess the bandage business must be pretty cutthroat in Russia.

We had tea at Czar Paul's palace (he was out) and took a tour of Lenin's office, where I weighed the possibility of stealing the pen and pencil set off his desk (the boys reminded me about the prison). We marveled at the great paintings in The Hermitage, some of which looked a little faded as they have been hung in the bright sunshine next to open windows, alternately heated and cooled for hundreds of years. We stood in the very room where the Russian Revolution started, with a guide so superbly theatrical that we paid her double her fee.

We thought that a genuine Soviet style dinner would be fun, so we went to a local shopping center to buy some provisions. This is a complex process. First, you stand in line at the cheese counter and pick out a piece of cheese. They weigh it and give you a tag. You take the tag to another line and pay. Then back to the cheese counter and get in line to pick it up. You repeat this process at the bread counter, the meat, fruit and so on. We split up and it still took an hour.

The produce in the winter is pretty bleak, but combine long summer days with the Russian mania for gardening and the yields are magnificent even by California standards. In the marketplace, wild strawberries are sold in quart glass jars by red-cheeked farm girls. The cabbages are the size of church bells. Old crones weigh out fresh peas into neatly reused paper sacks and shiny eggplants are stacked impossibly high, like cannon shells. During the German blockade, St. Petersburg's soup *du jour* used to be made of wallpaper paste so the townsfolk cherish their markets today.

We stayed at the delightful Sovietski Hotel again and one of our exhausted beds collapsed in the middle of the night not unlike the balcony the day before. We took the train to Moscow, it never broke 25 mph. The ventilation system and the windows were welded shut so we enjoyed a 500-mile trip in a toaster oven. At bedtime the porter passed out large clamps to hold our door closed against the inevitable brigands. And this was the first-class coach.

The next day, we dragged our sorry selves up to the front desk of the Radisson Moscow. The guards sneered at us as only Russians can. I asked for the general manager, explaining that he was expecting us. They called him and once again we saw how dropping the right name had a galvanic effect. To say our arrival was anticipated would be mild. Have you ever seen a bellman carrying a plastic bag of dirty t-shirts to the penthouse of a 500-room hotel? We had three bathrooms, three TV's and a magnificent view of the cars mowing down pedestrians on the street far below.

While we were jumping on the beds, there was a knock at the door. It was the general manager and a crew bearing flowers, fruit, Cham-

pagne, caviar and about 50 pounds of other stuff. He made us feel very welcome but I could see that he had no idea what was up with this rumpled guy and his rumpled kids.

The next day I called the Kremlin to see if Vladimir could do dinner. He didn't exactly scurry to the phone, so I left my number. We then went to see the sights, including the Russian equivalent of the Eiffel Tower, a businesslike radio tower where they gave us the third degree, including passport verification, just to go up. Two months later, the top of it exploded due to some electrical short and all the TV and radio in Moscow went out for a couple of weeks. We went to a military museum and discovered that the Russians were still pretty teed off at the Nazis and we finally wound up at a matinee at the Old Russian Circus where we saw more animals doing degrading things than I ever dreamed possible.

Ratty dogs dressed like whores, bears dressed like maids, moth-eaten kangaroos boxing and more bears masquerading as policemen, waiters and bicyclists. One bear was struggling on a motorcycle, and then it broke down during the act spewing oil all over the stage. So Russian. Tyler and Rowan liked it but I found the parallels between the animals and the locals hard to miss. I pictured the bears on their break behind the building, smoking and wishing they lived in Canada.

Then off to Gorky Park. This is a tumbledown amusement park for the filthy rich. One woman was walking around with a baboon. We stopped to look at it and she started demanding money just for looking in her direction. There was a three-story stucco rendition of Mt.



tyler challenges local strong man



if this didn't exist, I would have made it up

Rushmore and we each paid 7 rubles (50 cents) and climbed into rickety cars for the inside tour. It was supposed to be a haunted house and it truly was the scariest and most dangerous building I had ever been in. The cars were pulled herkily-jerkily through some grimy

plastic drapes and suddenly a mechanical monkey appeared out of the darkness, swinging a coconut on a chain. If you didn't duck it would hit you in the head. It did in fact hit the kid in the car behind us and we turned when we heard the crack of the coconut hitting his skull and the little bugger didn't stop crying (or bleeding) for the remainder of the ride. We were doused with rancid water, threatened with 2X4's festooned with real nails and deafened by truck horns. One room had burned out and we couldn't tell if the charred, stinking ruin was supposed to be part of the enchantment or just lousy maintenance. The cars came to a shaky halt just inside the exit and we clamored across the open trestle to freedom. It was definitely worth 50 cents.

We had a specific goal in going to Gorky Park and finally arrived at our quest: the space shuttle ride. This is a full-sized replica of the American space shuttle and costs 15 rubles to ride, in a country where a doctor makes only 45 rubles (three bucks) a day.

We paid the man and climbed into the belly of the beast and seat-belted ourselves into chairs, then took off. Up front, a scratchy video showed footage of the liftoff of one of the Russian rockets and then we saw the life and times of the crew on the MIR. At altitude, they released a master lever, freeing our chairs, which were gimbaled. If you squirmed around, you really did have the illusion that you were weightless. At one point a kid came out in a space suit with a fire extinguisher to enact a fire drill. He blasted CO2 all over and when everyone stopped coughing, the trip came to an end. It had lasted about

twenty minutes and we thoroughly enjoyed it, especially considering that it is by far the most expensive amusement ride ever built.

This was not a prop; it was a real space ship. The Soviets built two of these Burans and shot one unmanned around the world in 1988. They landed it, folded up the program and sold one to the highest bidder. The other one has been kept at the space center in Kazakhstan. Recently, there



plastic model \$8.00



real model \$8,000,000,000.00

was talk of reviving the program, or alternately, of selling the space ship but this talk ended when the roof collapsed on it. All that remains today is an amusement park ride in Moscow, which cost the Russian people as much to build as all of Disneyworld cost Americans. Somewhere in the 6-8 billion-dollar range.

We had had quite a day. As we walked through the lobby of our hotel, we could tell something was up. The guards were giving us fiercer looks than usual and the manager scurried up breathlessly. "Mr. MacNiven, you have a message from the Office of the President." He solemnly extended a silver tray on which rested a small envelope. I put it in my pocket without looking at it. Parting the crowd, we casually strolled to our room. Once inside, I ripped the envelope open. The note said that a Mr. Grandanko from the President's office had called and left a number. I dialed the number and Grandanko came on. He said that the President was too busy to meet with us and not to let the door hit us on our way out. He was actually quite firm. "Sorry boys," I told them, "no dinner with President Putin." Of course, the hotel staff didn't know that. I told Rowan and Tyler to change their shirts because we were going over to Red Square to harass the hawkers who were harassing the American tourists. We hurried through the lobby in a great rush and all heads turned in our direction. The manager, ever ready, stood by the door. "Mr. MacNiven," he asked, "may I please provide you with a car?"

"No thanks," I said, "We have a ride." We scurried out and disappeared around the corner, where we waved down a rickety Lada and told the driver we would pay him two bucks to take us to Red Square. In Russia you just point at a car and it usually pulls right over. You hold up a couple of greenbacks and name your destination. In Red Square the boys bargained fiercely for some reproductions of military medals and then, pretending to be Russians, resold them to Japanese tourists for three times what they paid.

Coming back late to the hotel, we found the attentive manager still on duty. We decided to have dinner and strolled among the restaurants, which were arrayed around the grand lobby. The maitre d's came forward and prostrated themselves, beseeched us to come inside. We ate far too much at a very nice Japanese/New England clam house with a high concept German interior. On the way back to our rooms we saw that there was a movie theater in the hotel. I asked the vigilant GM what was playing. He said it was *Die Hard 2* but that the theater was currently closed...then, thinking quickly, he said, "But we would be glad to open it for you." And so they did. They even fired up the popcorn machine. When in Moscow, always stay at The Radisson.



Chapter 20.

SEX, RELIGION, PHYSICS & POLITICS: A COMPREHENSIVE ANALYSIS

A Survey of Everything would not be complete without a thorough examination of sex, religion, physics and politics, so let's snap on the ol' rubber gloves and have a look. These topics are riddled with hilarity, especially physics, and since the distinctions between them are inconsequential, a single chapter should suffice nicely.

Take sex, for instance. Sex is as common as dirt. If you look closely, even the tiny bugs cavorting in the dirt are having it when they aren't eating each other or simply dying. For extra thrills, a few of them combine cavorting, eating and dying all at once, but it's really not the bugs that concern us here. It's us. The tragic fact is that most sex takes place in the movies between the movie stars. This may seem unfair but I don't make the rules.

Even I tread lightly here but in some corners our notions about sexuality begin with *six-year-old girls*! If that sounds unwholesome, I completely agree. I am not referring to actual pedophilia but rather its spiral-eyed uncle, the beauty pageants for tots, in which adults dress little girls up as tiny women and parade them around on stage.

Take my advice and skip the nationals. By then they have worked out most of the kinks and the contestants are hardened pros. Go to a regional where you will see less sophistication and can watch the parents putting these girls through their paces like trained seals. Maybe I'm overly sensitive but is it possible to end up as anything *but* a porn star if you have been dressing like one for 10 YEARS by the time you're 16? This would all be pretty hilarious except for the fact that they use real, live, little girls, for Christ's sake! I think the pageant organizers and the parents are holding open a hungry oven door for these kids. Everyone involved is severely demented, and not in a good way. The promoters claim that these pageants give young ladies confidence and poise. I'll bet they do. Nothing like a confident, poised 1st-grader in fishnet stockings and a tiny lace bra. Imagine being judged as a six-year-old and *losing* to a more beautiful replica of a woman. Yikes! This is the sort of thing that leads to incidents like the time that cheerleader's mother shot her daughter's rival's mother dead.

We can create entire agencies to make sure that we have an adequate supply of spotted moths splattering on our windshields as we drive through holes in the redwood trees, but there is no way to stop someone from cheerfully gluing two-inch purple eyelashes onto a person who is two feet tall on a day that is not Halloween. Make no mistake about it: kids' pageants are about sex. About the sex that adults have had trouble coming to grips with in their own lives. Here, some sympathy for the wacko parents is in order, because we have all been besieged with a good many unhealthy messages from an early age.

Neither the warnings from the Bible-pounders nor the enticements from the porn hustlers has done as much damage as the Great Satan of Sex. Forget about Pat Roberts and Larry Flynt. These guys are babes in the woods compared to Hugh Hefner. Hef, as his friends, press agents and bimbettes call him, has been defining femininity as clearly as the chalk outline at a murder scene for two generations. It was Hef who planted the nipple in the convenience store of the male adolescent imagination and from it sprung the female breast, which has grown to such titanic size that some women have their breasts inflated, then later deflated and put away like blimps returning from a military campaign. Hef brought us pubic hair and then **TOOK IT AWAY!** Hef introduced us to the concept of working in pajamas. This is the perfect attire for writers and men who make their living having sex with a dozen women a day. Chairman Mao was famous for doing the same thing, and also for starving to death 100 million people through inattention. I'm not saying that Hef is a mass-murdering Chinese emperor, only that he has introduced us to the concept that a man can live openly with twin sisters, later exchanging them for triplets who are collectively younger than their keeper. Not only was Hef having sex with the girl next door, he was also having sex with *all* the girls next door *and* their sisters. When a center fielder for the Oakland A's ran off with one of the triplets, the set became worthless so Hef ordered up an entire vanload of blonds. One of the recent litter is Japanese-American but all vestiges of Asia-ness have been supplanted, replanted and implanted and now she looks no more Japanese than Eleanor Roosevelt.

We know that one man can't possibly satisfy seven women, so we get to use our imaginations as to how



hef, mini-me and the seven blonds

they all get the job done. A few years ago we thought that Hef was done for. What could possibly be left for this geezer? Then boom! Viagra popped up and now he can't do an interview without mentioning it about 12 times, as if this is how he keeps his harem happy.

Myself, I went from equal measures of disgust and jealousy to about 60/40 when Hef brought the perennially cranky Mini-Me into the program. I was at a Halloween party at The Mansion shortly after the Playboy spread that featured the 7 blonds and this angry little cretin. He is remarkably small even by midget standards, if such standards exist; in fact, he is smaller than your average 6-year-old girl. He has been adopted by the 7 blonds as a sort of part-man, part-pet. I wore an 8-foot-tall Mini-Me Halloween costume that no one seemed to get except for him. You would think he would have been flattered but he went after my ankles with his little sharpened teeth.

Articles written about the lifestyle at The Mansion talk about how the concubines are into shopping, going to college, and teasing each other's hair. The reader is expected to supply the hanky-panky imagery necessary to make it the hedonistic palace of fantasies. I can tell you this: you simply can't imagine it. Hef's bubble bath bill is bigger than what the average family of four pays for food.

By no stretch am I some sniveling Alan Alda-type feminist, although my complete antipathy for sports (unless there are injuries) and beer makes me suspect. I'm an old-fashioned macho guy who thinks his wife should be barefoot and pregnant just as long as she will still do my laundry and taxes. So when I say that Hef is the Great Satan of Sex, just have a look at a typical rack of magazines, where you will find *Self*, *Me*, *I*, *Myself*, *Moi*, *Maxim*, *Tongue*, and *Stuff*. They all feature 22-year-old nobodies with big hair and big shirts overflowing with potential, or movie stars with enough makeup and soft focus to give them the timeless quality of waxed fruit. Consider that if a girl starts at, say, six years old and is still on the cover at nearly 70, like Sophia Loren, then she has spent her entire life as a caricature of a human woman. I have nothing against looking your best, but Sophia got her driver's license in WWII and no woman I know can keep up with her.

Lest anyone think that I'm too cool for school I remind you that I have actually dated an 83-year-old glamour queen so I'm just objecting on behalf of women who are less than perfect, according to Hef's standards, and the men who are hopelessly searching for them. I'm not suggesting that we go out and buy magazines with pictures of ugly people or that we should let ourselves get unreasonably flabby. In fact, I'm not suggesting anything. I think the whole perfect-woman thing is inevitable, but we need to remind ourselves that the best sex is between

people who laugh at each other's jokes and who think their mate is a nice person. Everything else is chump.

For most people, sex becomes less important as they get older. Right away a few of you will jump up and say, "Not true for me." I know, I know, sit down. You are the same ones who are better at everything, so this is for the rest of us. As sex stops being the only thing you think about there is more time for other important subjects like keeping your daughter off the back of a motorcycle and your son out of a hang glider.



Growing older means that you have more time to contemplate religion and physics, which are far funnier than sex anyway. I happen to be an Irrationalist. It's my religion. Irrationalism is a religion based upon whatever is most current in the world of physics, a collection of mind-numbing contradictions that would drive Mohammed to drink.

As of this writing there is widespread agreement (maybe not in Christian Science reading rooms but certainly in astrophysical circles) that The Universe began about ~~13.4~~ ~~13.5~~ 13.7 billion years ago with the explosion of a fragment of near-nothingness, which was just a smidgeon larger than infinitely small. Where did this take place? It took place everywhere at once since it brought *everything* (as in all of reality) along with it. This was the very first example of too much luggage. Fred Hoyle referred to this phenomenon as The Big Bang with the purpose of ridiculing George Gamow's theory because Hoyle thought the man a fool. Jokes this good don't happen every day. The fact that flammable and inflammable mean the same thing is funny, but no one is going to get a Nobel Prize out of it. Or are they?

George Gamow

(pronounced Gam-off)

George came up with the measurements that gave shape to the theory of the Big Bang. Poor George. Nobel Prizes have positively rained from the heavens on people such as Halldor Laxness, the Icelandic whiner who wrote turgid prose about how cold and awful it is to live in Iceland (Hey, Laxness, tell us something we don't know). Other people who got The Prize dreamed up far fluffier stuff than the creation of The Universe, plus George invented the term *nucleocosmogenesis* (the process by which the elements are created out of more fundamental components). This is a term that, when tossed into everyday conversation, is a good way to check whether people are paying attention.

If George had thought to name the theory the *Gamow Effect* it would have been pretty hard for those gummars in Stockholm to ignore him. After all, Hoyle is best remembered today as the guy who laughed at George and *he* won the Nobel Prize.

If you think I'm just joshing you, I'm not. I really believe a lot of this nonsense. Small boats often carry a device known as a 'sea anchor.' Basically this is a cone-shaped piece of heavy cloth, which, when tied to the boat and dropped over the side in heavy weather, keeps a boat from slipping too fast down the face of big ocean swells. Since many of our beliefs aren't anchored to the bottom we sometimes find ourselves out of our depth. Of course there are the over-confident ones, like the old Sioux Indian holy man who was asked to describe the nature of the world. He said that the world rode on the back of a turtle as it traveled through space. When asked what was below the turtle he said, "It's turtles all the way down."

Most religions teach that powers greater than ourselves watch over us, evaluating what we do and mucking about in our lives if we step out of line. Some religions tell about gods coming to earth, the dead popping out of the ground, and all sorts of other troubling prospects, which are designed to reduce our fear of the unknown. Personally I find the idea of the dead getting up once they have been buried less than comforting (and even unsanitary), but there are stranger things. The Mormons believe that God used to be a family man with a wife and kids and later got a better job, as *God*. There go my Utah sales.

Many religions have a single god who is different than the god the other guy worships. Some claim to worship the same god as you do, but know *Him* by a different name. Others refuse to refer to him as *Him* but call him *Her* or *It*. Orthodox Jews aren't supposed to write the name of you-know-who at all. Some religions preach that even if we completely disagree with one another all viewpoints are valid because everyone should get along and reality should take a back seat to harmony. I used to think that these



"just hose her off, she'll be good as new."

people were so unrealistically open-minded that their brains might fall out, but in the early 21st century I see a certain grace to this notion.

All this leads us right back to physics because physics makes no sense at all. One has to check rationality at the door, just as you would your Beretta at a Moscow mobster bar.

Historic speculation is a beautiful combination of comic nonsense and coincident accuracy. When the first locomotive came along there was some speculation that people would be turned inside out if they hit speeds over 35 miles an hour. The first large hot air balloon was sent up with a pig, goat and chicken to a dazzling height of 6,000 feet. Many people were afraid that there were poison gasses way up there (they got it partly right. 35,000 feet will kill you.) The ancient Greeks spoke of a vast continent at the bottom of the world. They called it Arktica. Even though it wasn't spotted until 1820, those old Greeks figured it should be there because it gave everything a nice balance. They had no notion of the Americas, however.

This is as good a time as any to bring up the subject of *ether*. Back when Darwin was trying to make bail for poor Mr. Scopes's monkey there was a popular notion that a 'certain something' occupied otherwise empty space. It had no density or any other material properties and was the place where the spirits roamed. By the early 20th century we became fully modern and scoffed at the very notion of the ether, relegating it to a dusty shelf along with all sorts of other voodoo.

It turns out that the ether not only exists but is far more vibrant than those whiskered old kooks ever imagined. The notion of *empty space* now sits on that dusty shelf in the space previously occupied by the rejected notion of ether. So what is this ether? Sure it's chock-a-block with cosmic rays and photons. Space is full of *time* (which is nature's way of keeping everything from happening at once) and of course there are gravitational waves but all that is far too easy. No, the best brand of ether is like the alchemists said: 'the discorporeal spirit world' — consisting of the dark matter, stacks of infinitely generated parallel micro-universes and mirror realities, essentially the cosmic honky-tonks of the gods.

Attempt to peel the onion of reality and by the time you disassemble the atoms themselves you end up with a mass somewhere between nearly zero and quite large. Rough sailing at best. But pick apart the ether and you find yourself unraveling *surreality*.

Some theorists have beautiful mathematical proofs for the way The Universe is wired, which very nearly work. In physics, though, proofs are an all-or-nothing proposition, so physicists sometimes toss in a few handfuls of extra numbers. They are completely up-front about doing so.

“Is That a Conundrum in Your Pocket or Are You Just Glad to See Me?”

If you look up *ravel* and *unravel* in the dictionary you end up with a lexiconological pretzel-shaped loop that just might be the key to string theory because *ravel* means “to come together and to fall apart” and *unravel* means *ravel* which still means “to come together and to fall apart.”

If you capitalized *ravel* it becomes *Ravel*.

This from Culture Kiosque online:

*“Ravel’s Bolero comes under psychiatric investigation 1 September 1997 — A British study, published in today’s *Psychiatric Bulletin*, suggests that Ravel’s *Bolero*, reputed to be the most often played composition in the repertoire, was the work of a pathological mind. Dr. Eva Cybulska, the author of the study, claims that the famous melody repeated 18 times without change during the course of the piece demonstrates that the French composer was possibly succumbing to Alzheimer’s disease. The Kent-based psychiatrist claims that *perseveration*, an obsession with repeating words and gestures, is one of the more notable symptoms of this pathology. In other words, the repetitive nature of the score’s principal theme is symptomatic of the degenerative condition that began to trouble the French composer in 1927 at the age of 52. Was it really Alzheimer’s disease or the budding tumor that later killed Ravel during brain surgery in 1937? We look forward to Dr. Cybulska’s diagnosis of the works of minimalist composers Philip Glass, Terry Reilly and Steve Reich.”*

Ravel is buried in Paris where he is currently both decomposing and unRaveling.

In quantum mechanics rounding off is called ‘normalizing.’ Of course accountants do this, too, but they generally don’t say it in the annual report to the stockholders.

It’s a fact that all cosmological, astronomical, and astrophysical research is conducted for the fun of it no matter how serious these people might seem. Well, for fun and to land more grant money for further studies to get more grant money to fund further studies...well, you get the picture.

Faking It

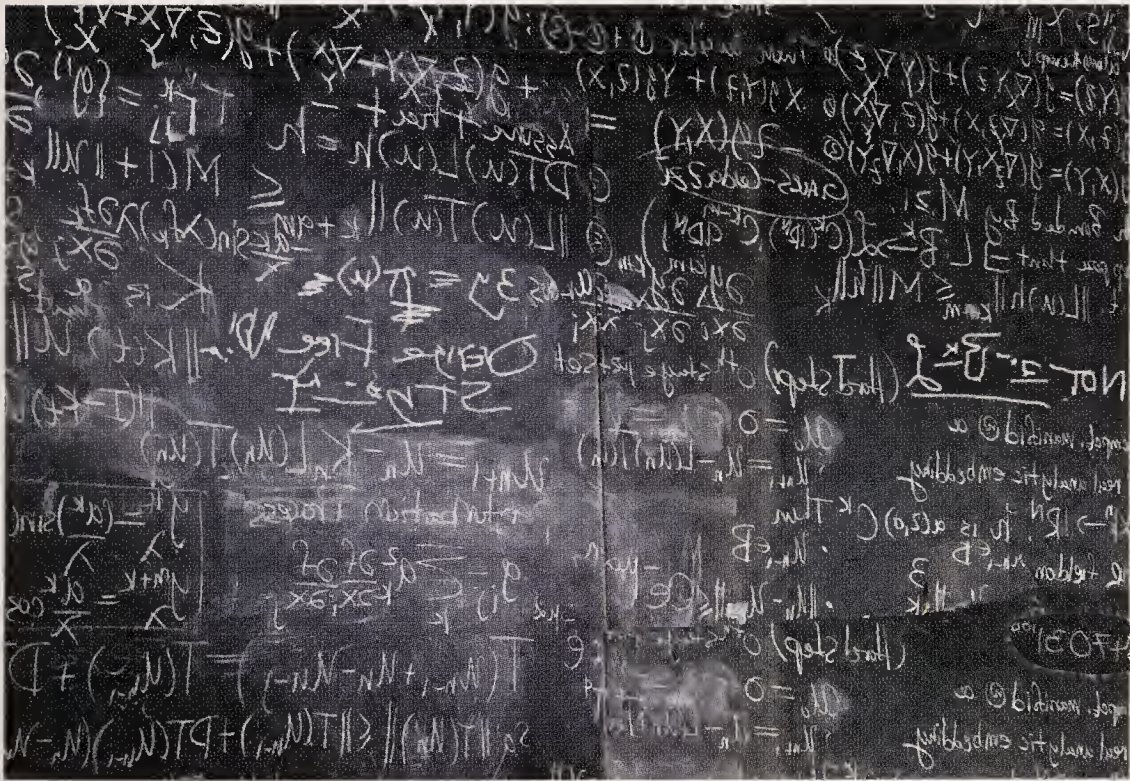
In astrophysics the equation for the value of *alpha* affects *lambda*, which gives us the cosmological constant. (You know, of course, that this is the expansion coefficient of The Universe.) The problem is that there are some troubling discrepancies in measurement vs. theory but if you employ a little rounding error called ‘the fudge factor’ things work out, more or less, and you can keep your day job at the U. This is no

so it was probably a trick question. Machines can now do all the computations you will ever need so taking any math classes at all will just cut into your beach time.

Theoretical physics requires no math skills whatsoever. The real skill is keeping a straight face when you're lecturing.

One sharp-edged theory is based on the concept of *emergent, virtual, spin-foam antimatter, waga-waga* (I added waga-waga as a sound effect). This is the jamming together of some of the hottest ideas in theoretical physics. Emergent, virtual, spin-foam antimatter answers both string theorists (hopelessly tangled in the 9th dimension) and the Christian Fundamentalists who dismiss me as a kook. With all these jumbled theories I sometimes feel that I have the free rein of a billionaire in a bike shop, rounding up all sorts of oddball ideas, falling nuts and rolling stones that careen through my brain all day, like dumdums through a jelly donut.

Come to the Church of the Irrationalism, and you will find badly dressed, confused looking men (nearly all physicists *and* religious leaders are men) covering acres of blackboards with inscrutable equations and computers grinding away all over the place like a maniacal church choir.



so much chalk, so little time

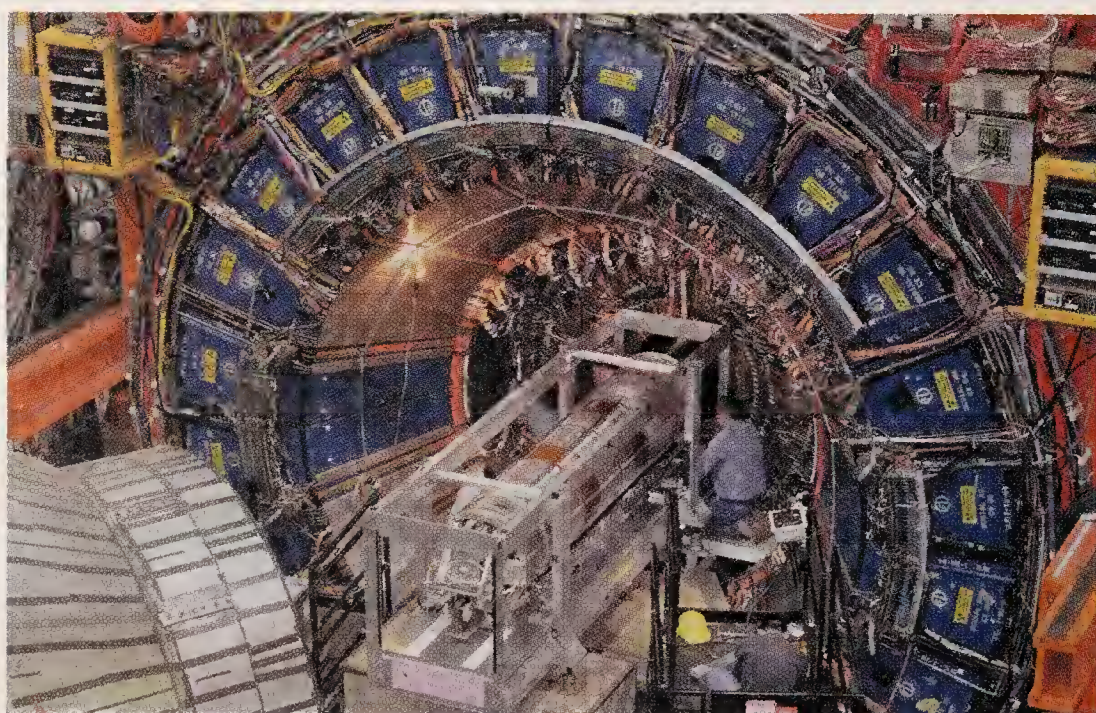
Much of this is presided over by a man who sits literally, figuratively and not at all, in the Newton chair at Cambridge. This is an exceedingly rare, tripartite irony. Stephen Hawking holds the Newton Chair at Cambridge but is so completely crippled that he is confined to a

wheelchair. This is compounded by the fact that there is an actual chair in which Newton once sat (but this actual chair is not *the* Newton chair) and that Stephen is unable to actually sit in it either. Hey, he brought it up and thinks it's funny so we are laughing *with* him. I ran into him at Hearst Castle about five years ago. He was being rolled past the Greek swimming pool at the precise moment when our guide told us that Groucho and his brothers used to frolic under the stern gaze of the well-endowed marble sculpture of Neptune. It was a religious event for me.

All of this irony is compounded by the fact that Stephen's wife left him because he was having an affair with another woman. No matter that he is paralyzed. See, this physics is *hot stuff*.

Even for the physicist, belief in physics involves a good deal of faith. For the average schmo, it's entirely faith based. As with any clergy, physicists have to fake it when they get in a tight spot with all that smidging and fudging. If you're a Catholic you have probably had your faith tested on occasion. Do saints really exist and intercede on your behalf? How hot is hell? Why does the Pope's hat look like a giant fingernail? These questions seem downright manageable compared to the question of black holes. A black hole is a collapsed star that has caved in so completely that the atomic structure we know and love simply gives up. This is a serious time-out zone; even light can't escape. These angry black holes just cruise around whacking everything that gets in their way, crushing time and light and gravity and little Chinese drink umbrellas out of existence. Basically they are the badass dudes of The Universe. The nifty part is that black holes are manageably small, say, the size of Racine, Wisconsin all the way down to tiny ones, about the size of a June bug, but as massive as Saturn and Neptune put together. There is a rather large black hole in our guest bedroom (astronomically speaking) at 28,000 light years from here. It is 3 million times as massive as our sun and is called Sagittarius A* or the A Hole for short. I hope you still have those rubber gloves on.

Competing theories about how things really run make front-page news in the leading science magazines as well as the birdcage-liner press. The latest rage is that time itself is an illusion. The theory postulates that everything is happening simultaneously and at every instant, infinite universes are replicating that each have different paths.



altar of the irrationalist (note the high priest tweaking the holy water nozzles)

In some universes, Hitler won the war and Oprah stayed thin. This becomes hard to grasp when you realize that in an equal number of infinite universes Hitler became a ballet dancer and was made of chocolate chips. This, and all other possible outcomes, are happening

simultaneously. The good news is that in most of the universes you didn't drink two and a half bottles of Möet at your sister's wedding and throw up on the cake. Unfortunately, in this universe you did. This theory of infinite multiple timeless universes gets my nod for the Largest Generator of Unnecessary Paperwork Award.

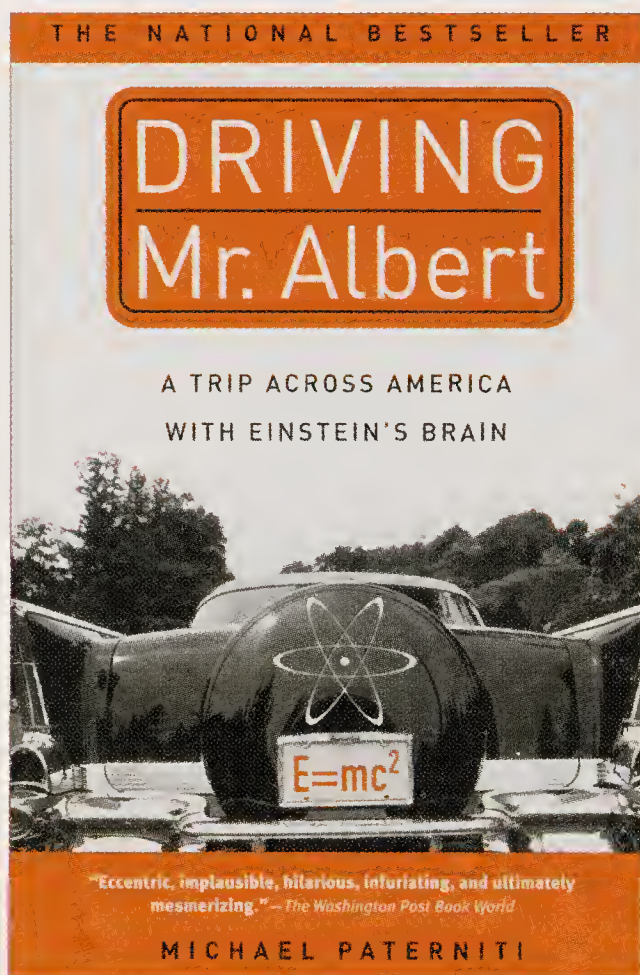
I think we are very close to understanding how the whole shee-bang works, but I predict that when we actually do crack the code, it will make no sense and be functionally useless. At this point we have quantum mechanics, which is the science of the very small, and astrophysics, the science of the very large. The problem is that we are stuck in the middle at about 4'3" (averaging in the kids) and right here the twain don't meet. It seems that because we lack a Unified Field Theory, physicists can't actually make the math work. If they run the calculation from the small to the large or the large back to the small things go astray and the math bumps into itself. They all look a bit silly with their mathematical shirts buttoned up off-register. The funny thing is that it doesn't seem to matter, because religions don't mesh very well with the observable world anyway, and physics is no different.

The Heisenberg Uncertainty Principle

This is now a fundamental building block at the itty-bitty end of physics. Heisenberg told us that, at the quantum level, the mere act of looking at tiny particles in the present can change in what form they were created in the past. This makes no sense but works like this. If I stare at you on a bus you might just move to another seat, but if we were on a quantum bus and I stared at you it might cause you to have become a fan-dancer in Samoa rather than a psychiatrist in San Diego. The mere act of getting involved with tiny particles in the present is said to affect their past. Hold on, it gets worse (we may need that psychiatrist). It is now a tenet of theoretical physics that for every bit of positive reality there is an opposite reality that could be anywhere in the universe. If a quark gets a cold in this reality its negative counterpart gets a cough on the other side of The Universe. John Wheeler (truly a physicist's physicist) has the notion that since electrons move at the speed of light (and at light speed, time doesn't exist), electrons are timeless. Being timeless, they have the capacity to be everywhere in The Universe at once. Since they were all together at the time of the Big Bang, they sort of keep in touch. Wheeler speculates that there is actually only one electron. He says that he is too old to run the math, so he calls it a notion rather than a theory. Most of us have grown up thinking of electrons as a bit of stuff spinning around protons and neutrons, but Wheeler suggests the electron might be a single wave, simultaneously doing all the work. Keep in mind that excited electrons make visible light; to see is to

know. Could the humble electron be the glue of The Universe? This idea of being everywhere at once has caused more than one physicist to become a metaphysicist. A metaphysicist is someone who finally had more questions than answers and moved from the lectern to the pulpit.

And what about the **dark matter**, which is where 91 percent of the mass from the Big Bang is lurking? I read that the Catholic Synod debated for a full day about how many angels could dance on the head of a pin. Of course this was over 1,000 years before the religion became overrun with power mad mobsters trying to keep science from messing up a good gig. At this point I wouldn't be surprised to discover that Julius Caesar was working the dinner theater circuit in Palm Springs and Lewis Carroll could easily have gotten a really fat grant if he hadn't spent all that time prattling on at Alice.



i know this is a '57 chevy but,
trust me, they went in a buick

Einstein fiddled with all this stuff and ended up in a complete muddle, first dismissing quantum theory and later embracing it, sort of. It naturally follows that 45 years after Einstein died his brain should end up in a Tupperware container traveling in a Buick down Route 80 on a visit to Einstein's granddaughter in Santa Rosa, California. The guy who drove the brain across the country wrote a whole book about the trip called *Driving Mr. Albert*. It seems that the pathologist who removed Al's brain kept it in his garage primarily to impress the ladies. In most religions, driving around in a ratty old Skylark with the brain of one of your prophets in the trunk is considered bad taste, but in mine it's just another way to meet chicks.

I can just see you, you snippy physicist out there, with that string of letters after your name like a fat spoonful of alphabet soup thinking, "What a complete putz! It doesn't work like that at all!" This reminds me of Sam Peckinpah's movie that has one of the best and one of the worst scenes ever in the very same movie. *Straw Dogs* was about a mathematician who went out to the country to work on some 'big math problem.' This mathematician (played by Dustin Hoffman) spends a lot of time staring at yet another big blackboard covered with numbers. The frighteningly bony English actress, Susan

George, plays his bored wife. At one point she changes a single digit in the vast field of squiggles. Later Dustin is staring at the board and sees the changed digit and yells that he isn't "playing games here!" In another scene, Susan is naked and her sallow skin is a very scary sight if you have been brought up at the pj-clad knee of Uncle Hef with all the airbrushed expectations of the Playboy Lifestyle.

The fact is that all of them *are* playing games. Is it an accident that Groucho's favorite costume was that of a professor?

If you think my ideas are offbeat, keep in mind that I have both the multiple-universe people and the Buddhists solidly on my side. I rest my case.

Oh, I forgot to discuss politics. Oh, who cares: screw politics.



Chapter 21.

"WE'RE GOING TO VIETNAM"

"I hear that's a beautiful country," people would invariably say when I said I was going there a couple of years ago. Of course, the first thing that pops into *my* mind when I think of Vietnam is that we paved the place with bombs, bullets and napalm, irritating the locals and driving us into a frenzy of indignation back home. Our government had whipped up a paranoid fantasy that countries in Asia were going to fall to Communism like a cascading row of dominos and that we had to put our foot down in order to stop it. And put it down we did. It turned out that this was a bad idea; Communism was internally wired to self-destruct, as it has done with regularity ever since.

So my 18-year-old son Rowan and I decided to surprise his older brother Tyler when Tyler's ship pulled into Saigon on his tour around the world with the University of Pittsburgh's Semester at Sea Program. On a given day during this program, you might find Tyler powwowing with Nelson Mandela, or mingling with rioting revelers in Rio, or perhaps hunkering down with the Bushmen in the Kalahari. He went to India, where many locals can't afford to buy lunch for 3 cents. He went to Singapore where a Bentley costs about \$800,000.03 and people *can* afford to buy them.

We donned coolie hats and as Tyler disembarked, Rowan jumped the unsuspecting lad and tried to sell him a watch. Tyler looked at him with mild disinterest until it dawned on him that his father and brother had traveled to the backside of the planet to bring him clean socks.

Vietnam is *not* a beautiful country. Buzzing swarms of squawking motor scooters choke the garbage-strangled streets in a civic nightmare. War is still a vivid memory here; legless men and people deformed by Agent Orange lie begging in the streets. This country is shaking off the past with sheer guts and grit. Just my kind of place.

We drove out to the tunnels at Cu Chi, where for 28 years 10,000 people lived underground in 240 kilometers of 3-foot-high dirt passages. What began as a simple raid of the French storehouses during that war in the '50s evolved into an elaborate



underground city where people were born, married and died by the thousands. The tunnel people had no names, only numbers, so that they couldn't inform on their comrades if captured. *Do you, Number 6743, take Number 9831 to be your lawfully wedded wife?* The tunnels are just large enough to crawl through. When U.S. bombs and tanks failed to rout the Viet Cong, American GIs called tunnel rats would go in after them with flame throwers. Not surprisingly, this turned out badly for both sides.

The area is now a major tourist attraction and people come from all over the world to see the incredible ingenuity of the Viet Cong tunnel people. They made rice wine (actually 100-proof moonshine from primitive stills), devised hatches that swelled when wet to keep the tunnels dry, and scavenged unexploded U.S. ordinance and remanufactured it into anti-tank mines. The most vivid displays were of the ingenious tiger traps, which came in many variations. A common model had a pivoting door with a center bar; step on either end and down you went, to be swiftly impaled on sharpened stalks of poison-tipped bamboo. Another model was a simple round hole rimmed with iron-maiden steel spikes that closed into you as you were delivered into eternity.

Ti, our guide, was chatty, if a tad hostile, and he had been on *our* side during the War. Ti said that the War resembled a Tom and Jerry cartoon run out of control. The Chinese supported the North Vietnamese war effort and, when that relationship soured, Russia took up the slack. My, how things change. The Vietnamese people originated in China about 2,100 years ago and the two countries had always maintained strong ties, even after Vietnam became independent about 1,000 years ago.

The Russians and the North Vietnamese got along well until a few more dominos fell in the late '80s and the Communists lost their snap-crackle-and-pop all across Europe. In 1991, the Russians stopped returning calls, which left Vietnam pretty much out in the cold; or in their case, out in the humid heat. Since then, however, vibrant alliances have developed with Thailand, Japan, and the U.S.

We stayed at the Rex Hotel. This is where the American generals holed up 30 years earlier. From the balcony we had a good view of the traffic below, which surged in all directions like millions of urgent wasps. For the first couple of days we assumed there were no traffic lights, but we soon discovered that they do have a few tiny ones the size of flashlights, which are largely ignored. Crossing the wide streets is simple: say goodbye to your friends and loved ones, close your eyes and deliberately saunter across. Don't look. Don't hesitate. Like wind-surfers, the vehicles merely sail around you. It seems that everyone in

the entire country is on the road at the same time on the same street. We saw unimaginable things hauled on scooters: a score of 20-foot-long steel pipes; a bundle of aluminum cans the size of a Chrysler; a bathtub; a pair of 5-gallon glass bottles of gasoline. Consider this charming phraseology: a basket of piglets on the back of a scooter has a "round-trip ticket" but one large hog has a "one-way ticket." The scariest thing of all was a huge spike-tipped iron gate which, if it fell, would have skewered the entire block. No one wears a helmet in Vietnam. They make the claim that all the bad drivers have already been killed but that isn't really true. The hospitals are full of senselessly smashed heads.

Cuba and North Korea look Communist: gray, drab and poverty-stricken. But Vietnam looks like a capitalist free-for-all. Stereo stores are packed literally cheek-by-jowl beside gigantic pigs turning on spits, next to hair salons, coffin shops, and stores selling oversized paintings of Napoleon on his white charger. They just love that guy. I think it's because he represents a Frenchman who came to a bad end as did the French when they tried to run Vietnam. Nearly everyone is hawking the same Rolex, Gucci and Nikon knockoffs from China. Some of these are quite good copies, not the cheap junk you see on the streets of NYC. In fact, they knock off nearly everything you can imagine. North Face Himalaya packs: 20 bucks. 125cc Honda: 400 bucks (although Honda has cracked down on them and the ones made in China now say "Honga"). You can buy Guess blue jeans with all the correct paper labels and even the Lonely Planet guidebooks, faithfully reproduced along with Harry Potter DVDs for \$2. You can also get real tiger skins, crocodiles and BMWs.

Rich Communists and foreigners live in some pretty ritzy parts of town, with 20-story marble towers whose ground floor shops sell Gucci and Hermes; not the knockoffs, but the real thing, I think. Who knows—maybe the towers are made of Corian?

We left Saigon for Hanoi. 800 miles north, the world changed once again. We passed up the Hanoi Hilton with its notoriously dreadful room service; it used to be an American POW dungeon. We toured the marketplaces where the chicken is so fresh that it's still walking and talking. The rows of neatly arranged goose heads contrasted beguilingly with the stacks of Snickers Bars and live puppies destined for the pot. I always like the fish sections the best. Some eely looking creatures were so tiny that a thousand would fit into a teaspoon. I was quite taken with a couple of fellows who were carving tombstones that featured a lot of creative writing and a laminated photograph of the departed. He had a very nice one featuring Britney Spears but had politely left the death date uninscribed. About 15 of us from the ship

hung out together for several days in the country west of Hanoi. I have to admit that once out of the city the land is beautiful even if still full of trash. Tyler outfitted himself in what he thought was traditional *Mong* clothing only to find out that it was actually *Moung* clothing and that he paid the absurdly high price of \$7. Later some Moung villagers had a good laugh that he had been so badly taken, because they would have sold him a similar outfit for \$4.



“can you write, to my dear pal...”



tyler considers mong

There are some 50 ethnic groups in Vietnam, and our goal was to visit the Montagnards, the hill people, who have been living in the uplands for thousands of years. We stayed in the small village of Mai Châu, consisting of some 25 thatched houses, called long houses. They are elevated above floods, cobras and rodents on teak stilts. The Chinese think little kitties make pretty fine taco stuffing and pay high prices



tyler goes moung

for them, so rats have become a huge problem. Some Chinese believe that if you eat enough snake and cat, you will gain the benefits of the tiger and the dragon. Our guide had no love left for the Chinese. He said that they eat everything with legs except the table, everything with wings except the airplane and everything that swims except the submarine. In China they have a strict one-child rule resulting in the infanticide of a great many baby girls. The inevitable shortage of marriageable women has resulted in a brisk trade in brides bound for China, much to the displeasure of the Vietnamese.

Some of the hill tribes aided the Americans during the war and are still held in contempt, but the ethnic Thais, which number about a million in a country of 88 million, are considered elite and very smart. Even though they are often village people, they are admitted to the universities without entrance exams and they often take high government positions. It can be rugged in the north. Some regions are so isolated that two

living species of never-before-documented large mammals (over 100 lbs.) were found in the 1990s long after scientists thought there were none left to discover anywhere on Earth.

Like so many places (except Iceland), Vietnam has a topsy-turvy logic to life. You cannot drive a motorcycle over 125 cc's without a special, hard-to-obtain license, but they let me drive the passenger train part of the way from Saigon to Hanoi without so much as a Blockbuster Video card.

Of course, these contrasts are what make travel so much fun. Rowan and I went ice-skating in the 90 degree heat, stumbling over the chunky ice, past pictures of polar bears and palm trees while the strains of *We Wish You a Merry Christmas* blared from the half-blown speakers. We bought real cobras pickled in wine, available everywhere in sizes ranging from little wigglers to 6-foot serpents. We drank avocado frappés and ate bits of food mercifully cut up too small to be identified. My favorite food, something I had never seen before, was called *Thang Long* or dragon fruit. It has a brilliant red rind with a snowy white interior featuring tiny crunchy black seeds.

On the last night of our visit with the villagers, they announced that we would be honored with a special dinner of roast dog, cat and cobra. Dessert was to be a pudding made of cow dung. Just before dinner most of our group evaporated prior to discovering that it was an April Fool's joke and that they had been badly had. I was sort of looking forward to eating the cobra and had to be content with eel instead. After dinner, the local folks entertained us in the long house, dancing and singing traditional songs in a shy, lovely fashion. We taught them the boogaloo and the limbo.



goofing with mounng err...
maybe mong kids



dragon fruit

One thing you can say for certain about the people of this country is that they work as hard as wildcatters on triple time. You don't see game arcades, movie theaters or people loafing around. They're desperate to modernize and realize that their uncontrolled growth is crip-

pling their future so they welcome foreigners with the skills to help them develop. It looks like Hong Kong in the '50s.

We went to the American War Remnants Museum (popularly known as the American War Crimes Museum). It was once a French prison, complete with a well-used guillotine, and later became the US Embassy. The most memorable photo from that era is of the last helicopter evacuating the American personnel from the roof in 1973. The place is now filled with vivid pictures of the war and its aftermath. There are pictures of The My Lai Massacre and GIs with collections of human heads. This is a museum from the perspective of the victors. Do you recall that we never declared war on this country? In spite of the fact that two million people were killed, including 58,000 Americans, we called it a *police action*. Look out, Rodney King! Only two senators, Morse and Gruening, voted against the Tonkin Gulf Resolution that fully committed us to this war. Make no mistake: it was no police action. As we drove through the streets of Saigon we passed a pile of U.S. war-planes, which had been heaped up like a mound of trash, left as a reminder that it was a shooting war of the most virulent nature.

In 1969 I got a letter from the US government telling me that they would like it if I would "Come on down to Vietnam, 'Whoopee! We're all going to die,'" as Country Joe McDonald would sing it. I wrote two words on the envelope, the second of which was the word "*you*," and mailed it back. For years we sort of looked the other way about the War but when Nixon died and was eulogized as a great president, good at foreign policy (if you overlooked Southeast Asia), it truly made me sick. Nixon tried to kill me and helped instigate the deaths of some of my friends. He and his co-conspirators decided that they were going to run our lives as they saw fit; if we didn't like it, we could go to jail, Canada or hell. Some will say that it was Kennedy's fault and others will pin much of the blame on Johnson but it was Nixon and his pals who were the baddest of the bad boys.

Why Nixon Really Left Office

The butterfly-wing/hurricane theory is bogus. The reigning opinion is that large systems are governed by large factors but sometimes the "*want of a nail*" does directly lead to big changes. In the '60s (oh, the '60s again) there was a fella named Dick Tuck who had it in for candidate Richard Nixon. Tuck would dog the poor man with spectacular stunts like the time Tuck dressed up in a brakeman's uniform during one of Nixon's 'whistle-stop' train tours. During a stop in San Luis Obispo, California, Tuck signaled the engineer to start moving the train in the middle of Nixon's speech. Later, Tuck hired a number of very pregnant women to carry signs at Nixon rallies with Nixon's very own campaign slogan:

Nixon’s the One.

Nixon had his own bag of tricks such as sending postcards from a non-existent *Communist League of Negro Women* to conservative white voters in California urging them to vote for Nixon’s opponent.

Tuck countered by hanging a sign behind Nixon just before a Chinatown speech accusing Nixon of corruption. It was written in Chinese and served as a nifty backdrop for the TV cameras.

The Nixon tapes give us a clear record of Nixon’s views on Tuck, “We’re up against an enemy, a conspiracy. They’re using any means. We are going to use any means. Is that clear?” said Nixon, pounding on the desk. A few weeks later, Nixon’s ‘dirty tricks’ department broke into the Watergate Hotel and that was it for both Tricky Dicks.

The anti-war movement grew like the anti-slavery movement in America. The common belief in early United States history was that it was OK to keep people as slaves. But culture changes and now slaveholding is rather unpopular in this country. The anti-war movement was ignited by individuals who thought that even if Communism did take over in Vietnam, it was not our business to meddle. However, things develop inch by inch and we didn’t just drop a half a million men in on a given day. We sent in a few hundred advisors who were supposed to tell the South Vietnamese how to run a war. Hey, didn’t the French come to the aid of the American Revolutionaries in 1779? It is important to remember that in Vietnam it was basically the South against the North with a little strip of land called the DMZ in the middle where they intended to more or less cut the place in half with the same sort of success seen in Korea and Germany. The North and the South fought ferociously, but the Southern leadership never held the hearts of the people as did the North. Even with our vastly superior firepower, men, women and children in sandals made of truck tires kicked the crap out of us. We tend to not use women and children as soldiers but they were fighting for their lives whereas we were fighting to stop one Vietnamese from telling another that he couldn’t own more than one water buffalo. We blundered into a bloody quagmire and got our heads handed to us. If you don’t believe me ask the former Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara. In 1995, he said: “We were wrong, terribly wrong. We owe it to future generations to explain why.”

Our government entered a war based on misguided policies and then systematically lied to the American people about what was really going on just as the governments of Japan and Germany had done in WWII. But there were two juggernauts that were largely responsible for stopping the war sooner rather than later. One was the *press*. Yes, that same press everyone complains about. People like to whine about

journalists, car salesmen and lawyers, but we love them when we need them and, believe me, we needed the press. Early in the war they used to give a weekly body count on television of the number of U.S. dead. The numbers got so large that our government suggested that the networks refrain from doing this. They complied. But the print media had no such constraint. TV did show the body bags being loaded onto airplanes for the trip home but, for some reason, they thought it was bad taste to continue to give the actual totals after a while. But the films of the carnage night after night made it increasingly obvious that things were not going well. Much was kept from the press but most of the facts did leak out, such as the incursions into neutral Laos and Cambodia and the Pentagon Papers.

The second major reason the war finally ended was the popular uprising of the idealistic youth of America. And to these young people we add the very youthful Dr. Benjamin Spock (famous for being the first leading pediatrician to advise parents not to spank their children) and eventually those in the government and U.S. military. I was surprised to see pictures of Berkeley war protesters at the museum, in which young people stuck their faces into the gun barrels of the national guardsmen who were called out to shoot us students, juxtaposed with pictures of people my sons' ages being blasted to bits.

The U.S. evacuated the last of its embassy personnel from the rooftop in Saigon in 1973, even though the war continued for two more years. During that time, Nixon was evacuated by helicopter from the White House and Kissinger humiliated us further by actually arguing about the shape of the negotiating table where we would hammer out our terms of disengagement with the Vietnamese. Years later it was revealed that Nixon had created an Enemies List of disloyal Americans. I had the good fortune to have been raised to think for myself and at 18, I could weigh the facts and consequences as they came to me. I realize that everyone didn't have that same opportunity and therefore they were duped, to their and the world's regret. I don't feel smug nor do I think they were stupid. It is all far too tragic for either sentiment.

As I was looking at the embassy roof from which the last of the Americans had made their escape, I found myself standing next to three retired American soldiers from a tour bus. They were trading information as to which division or company each had been in. When they asked me what group I had been with, I hesitated and said, "I was with the people's army in Berkeley."

The man who asked turned a ghastly shade of white. He glared at me with his old drill sergeant's eyes and hissed malevolently, "I don't think that is very funny." He and the second man seemed to wind them-

selves up a little, not sure what to do. The third man silently put his arm around my shoulder, two tears chasing down his cheeks, and the four of us walked out of the compound together and into the steaming streets of today's Vietnam, all on the same side at last.



smile, you're in japan

Rowan and I waved goodbye to Tyler and his shipmates and flew to Tokyo, where the local tribes are the cleanest and most civilized of any on earth, with enough nuttiness to make them loveable. Japan is as different from Vietnam as Toronto is from Tahiti. Being drunk in public or committing suicide isn't considered dishonorable, but jaywalk and you're in trouble. If I had invented the world, I would have invented Japan first. The Japanese laugh a lot and are so exceedingly polite that it nearly seems weird. When I bought a single Coke, the young woman who sold it to me made such a big deal of it that you would think I saved her child from a burning building.

Rowan decided to test the mettle of these dear people by going into a fancy dessert shop on The Ginza and purchasing an elaborate confectionary called a shu cream. The clerk placed it in a small box and carefully closed the lid. He then wrapped the box in colorful paper and tied it with a ribbon and put it in a bag. The three men in attendance all bowed in unison. Rowan bowed deeply back. They bowed again. Rowan would have continued bowing, but I laid a restraining hand on his shoulder or we would be there yet. Still standing in the shop, Rowan slowly removed the layers of packaging and held the shu cream to the light, admiring its stunning craftsmanship. This creation was an affair of kiwi, strawberries and custard on sponge cake about the size of his fist. He then opened wide and rammed the entire thing into his mouth, devouring it in one bite. The clerks were as shocked as if you had high-fived the Emperor. I'm sure they will be discussing this remarkable event for years to come.

We went to Japan to see the wacky stuff and see it we did. They built a maritime museum five stories tall in the shape of a ship and we were the only ones there. We went to the Tsukiji, the largest fish market on Planet Earth, where a single fish has sold for 200 grand (hey, make mine well done!). Next door, at the fruit and vegetable market, we watched the cantaloupe auction. The auction was puzzling, as the



attempting to reason with locals of a mile long, full of snow and a lot of very bad snowboarders crashing down the slope. It was there we saw a troop of robots performing aerobics. The cafeteria had some real pretty oddball fare. Hold those Tater Tots, I'll have the scrumptious sounding *Edible Wild Plant*.

The next day we met up with the amazing Yuka, who lived with her parents. This is a worldly family who owns a very successful kimono shop. They have been practically everywhere, but I discovered the one place they had not yet visited: the Western Village, north of Tokyo. This is a re-creation of one man's vision of the town pictured in the TV show *Gunsmoke* and it does actually look like a movie set. They have gunfights in Japanese and a single horse that scares the heck out of the locals. The *pièce de résistance* is the second largest Mt. Rushmore in the world at 85 feet tall. Visiting the Western Village was part of my ongoing quest to see all the Mt. Rushmores over six feet tall in the world. Thus far, I have seen four out of the seven. Inside the concrete mountain is a gift shop and a treacly museum of



"do you have shoes to match the snow leopard?"

life-sized teddy bears who were driving cars and having tea parties. We were a little surprised to see the purses displayed in the gift shop: Thai cloth—\$45; snow leopard—\$7,500; or coyote—\$7,500.

They have had a bit of difficulty transporting the Old West to the Nikko Prefecture. A few



only 29 million dollars

months earlier, for the grand opening, they planned a Texas-style BBQ. When the bills came in they discovered that a 'truckload' of watermelon cost \$40,000, coming to about \$50 per head (I hate to think what the baked beans cost). I had been booked to call a square dance at the OK Corral but somehow we got the dates wrong and no one showed up. That was OK by me. I had never called a square dance before so I would have been terrible at it. Though, perhaps, not as terrible as the façade of four very bored Presidents glaring down at the entirely empty amphitheater. The Japanese like corny American stuff but even the brats were gunning for the exits. This 180-million-dollar flop was equal measures of unbridled enthusiasm and tragic misreckoning. Personally, I think the owner should have blown his dough on something practical, like wall-to-wall leopard skin carpeting and cubic zirconium rings. I absolutely love this place.

So we moseyed on down the road as fast as our boot heels would take us to the Tobu World of Wonders, which cost far more than the Western Village. I expected an even thicker layer of cheese there, but we were absolutely staggered by what we saw. There were about 100 replicas in 1/20th scale of the great places in the world. NYC with its eerie 50-foot-tall World Trade Center was next to the Great Pyramids nestled between the Eiffel Tower and the Vatican. Tower Bridge of London could be seen from The Great Wall of China. Thousands of real bonsai trees covered the hills and over 165,000 miniature spectators peopled these dioramas. I could find no two people alike. These tiny tourists were taking pictures, yelling at their children, riding elephants, crashing cars and one was even robbing a bank. All the little people wore brilliantly colored clothes of lime green, purple and pink, even though real people generally wear black (except for me).

Yuka took us to the temple complex at Nikko. She pointed out some small carved wooden monkeys who hear, speak and see no evil (lucky them). These are *the* original monkeys we are all so familiar with. The magnificence of these temples rivals any in the world, but the buildings are all much smaller than the great cathedrals in



inadvertent memorial



"anyone have change for a dollar?"

Europe. The Japanese are not a particularly church-going people and pretty much deal with spiritual matters at the close of business. Funerals here are the most costly of any in the world. The average tab is 17 grand and can ring in at ten times that, but you are allowed to be buried with your pets, which shaves off a few bucks. Most folks are Buddhists (reverence for peace and serenity) gracefully integrated with Shintoism (the worship of bugs, rocks and trees). The fastidious rituals of daily life seem to be the principal spiritual expression of the Japanese.

In Tokyo, we went to pay homage to the mega-Toyota showroom. Its main feature is a ten-story high vending machine. Press a button and an elevator brings a model car to you. This showroom is part of a vast department store/theme park and

we got hooked on a strange video game where you hold onto a dog leash attached to a plastic dog and the video screen allows you to take the dog for a walk in the park. Oh boy, that was fun!

They talk about a recession in Japan, but it isn't obvious, as there are several 80-story buildings being constructed and since for lease signs are not considered good taste, the place looks full. The people are worried about their future, though, and the homeless are filling the public parks in ever-greater numbers. The Japanese don't like to bring in foreign workers and they have a very low birth rate. If nothing changes, the population in 100 years will be half of what it is now and the average age will be about 55. In a country with such a long history, that isn't so very far away.

The Japanese are a soulful, big-hearted people and as long as they keep inviting me to the dance, I'll keep going.



"hey, this is fun!"

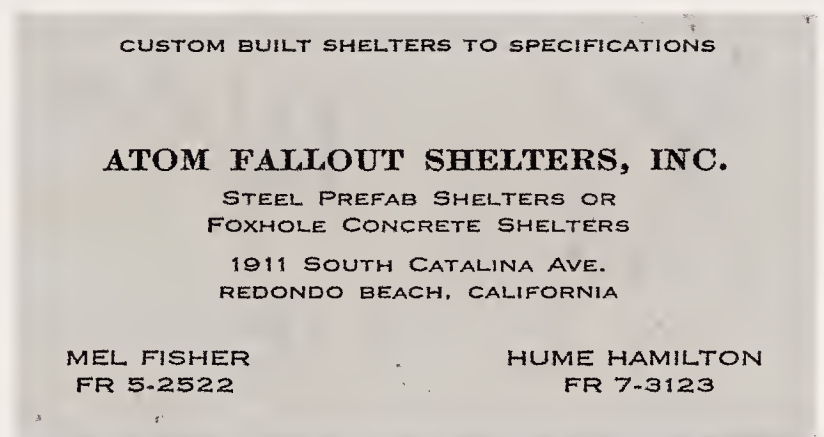


Chapter 22.

LIFE IS A FATAL DISEASE

Rich or poor, there are two things no one can get out of. You have to actually go *in person* to get a driver's license and you have to do your own dying. One great thing about a dog's life is they don't know how it all comes out but in between you being whacked on your cute little buns by the OB and having a half a dozen handles slapped on your box and your friends kicking your tired old butt into the ground, you can have a few laughs. You might as well make them as big as possible.

I started scuba diving back when god was a boy. I was in the last scuba class taught by a man named Mel who owned Mel's Aqua Shop in LA. In the early '60s, Mel told us that he was selling the shop and was going to Florida to look for sunken Spanish treasure. Sure, Mel. Even at fifteen I knew his chances were thin as a Depression dime. But later he found the



fisher was always on the hustle Atocha, the richest Spanish treasure ever discovered and once again I found out that I didn't know what I was talking about. I think scuba diving is pretty boring if you go to those nice resorts and float around with a bunch of fish. I've been to the Great Barrier Reef in Australia where it's fish, fish, fish and trust me, they all taste alike. Sometimes interesting things happen though, like the time I was on a dive boat at San Nicolas Island off Southern California. A gung-ho diver came up from the depths with this big, flat, trashcan-lid of a fish that he had speared. Holding it by the tail, he asked his friend to take his picture with this prized halibut. I didn't know what it was but it was no halibut. Just as the deck hand started to yell, "Noooooo," the hapless lad was knocked to the deck shrieking in pain with his eyes about to pop out of their sockets. He had actually been holding an electric sting ray by the business end. It made a great photo but a disappointing dinner.

People often equate diving with shark attacks but I had never been afraid of sharks. On the other hand, I had never seen a really big one up close so I was looking forward to going out with my friend Ron Elliott who, for many years, has been a professional sea urchin diver at the Farralon Islands about 30 miles outside of the Golden Gate. He is the only one brave enough, tough enough and dumb enough to go out there

and harvest these wretched beasts. Urchins are an ancient life form composed of a half-sphere of poisonous needles made out of calcium and attitude. If you step on one it can fester for years. I have always been afraid of only two things: being abandoned at a gas station and sea urchins. Sure, Ron's a tough guy but leave him behind at a Shell station and watch him bawl.

Ron dives by himself with a hookah rig (a regulator with a hose connected to an air pump on the surface) and he can pull up over 2,500 lbs in a day. The Japanese eat the eggs and like so many bizarre things they do they will pay hilarious amounts of money for what tastes essentially like cod liver oil Jell-O.

I begged Ron to take me out and after wearing him down he finally agreed to let me tag along. I didn't want to fuss with those damn urchins but I did want to swim around with the great white sharks that hang out at the islands in substantial numbers. They are reported to come up to seal pups and, grabbing them by the ankles, snap them so fast that the seals slip out of their skins. Then the sharks eat them like a peeled banana.

Eric Brandenburg was going to come along to collect the few floating shreds of us in a dip net. I feel pretty comfortable at sea, even if passengers of mine have had a few complaints. I've owned four boats but only two of them have actually sunk (2 1/2 if you count the Amphicar.) But this was Ron's boat and he was a pro and since he had been in the water with these infidels hundreds of times I figured he would make it one more day. We dropped a hook in uncharacteristically calm water and suited up. I planned to make a single dive with an air tank while Ron worked the bottom breathing through the hookah. I used to carry a knife, which, as every diver knows, is a very effective defense against sharks. If you get in trouble, you stab your buddy and swim like hell back to the boat. Since I could not possibly out-swim Ron, I left my knife behind. Urchin diving takes place in about 30 feet of water and Ron can stay in for as long as four hours. I had hoped we would chum the sea with a bloody cow head or something but Ron advised against it. He said the sharks are generally harmless enough, unless riled. I made note of the double qualifier.

Now, I figured that this would be no big deal, but when there is no 85-foot dive boat with dive masters, established procedures or safety in numbers, it takes on a different tenor from an organized dive. It's just you and the sea and after all that begging there was no going back. Eric helped me with my tank and over I went. If I wet my pants in a wetsuit it wouldn't be a big deal anyway.

I was down about five minutes when the first shark hove into view.

It looked just like what you would expect: a set of teeth about twelve feet across mounted to a stomach the size of a Cadillac hearse but much faster. The shark swam over near Ron but he didn't even stop popping urchins loose to look at him. The shark sashayed out of sight, picked up a friend and came right back. In less time than it takes to scream "SHARKS!!" there were three. One of them had a couple of fierce looking bites taken out of him. My pounding heart must have attracted them. You can keep an eye on a single shark, but you tend to lose track of three. I had never experienced panic before. It is as horrifying and uncontrollable as driving a car over a cliff. It works like this; overwhelming fear takes the place of rational calculation because the flight response overcomes any attempts at reason. I knew I was losing it. I started up toward the boat turning in tight circles, trying to keep all of my new friends in sight. I was hyperventilating and spinning on the edge of hysteria. Then I became tangled in Ron's air hose. He turned toward me and sized the situation up in an instant. He swam over to me, grabbed me by the shoulders and rapped firmly on my mask to focus my attention. We swam to the surface. I tried to get out of the water but I was wound in the hose. Ron whipped out his knife and, swoosh, cut his own air hose. Eric shut the pump off and I struggled aboard. Ron tossed his regulator into the boat and said he would be right back. He actually put the knife in his teeth and, fins up, disappeared. I imagined he had gone back down to kill all the sharks but he was actually securing his collection bag and he was back in a flash and up on deck, hauling in the catch, which was attached to a line.

He explained that this is why he doesn't like to bring people along. I spent a year pleading with him to take me out to sea, and now I was begging to go back to the dock. He said the sharks are harmless except for the bad ones. Bad ones? He said they are the aggressive males with chunks bitten out of their sides and fins. He said even he gets out of the water if he sees one of them. Oh, good information, I thought.



The sea might be dangerous but there is just as much danger from above. Like most people I have found the antics of Larry Walters immensely satisfying. In 1982 Larry decided that he should explore the skies above Long Beach, California. He had the notion that he could take a cheap folding lawn chair and, with enough helium-filled weather balloons, drift around the neighborhood then drop back in and drink some beer and grill some dogs. He thought that he had better take along a gun so that if things got out of control he could shoot out a couple of



larry leaves long beach

balloons and drift back to earth. Sure, that might work. One Sunday afternoon he gathered a few addle-brained friends and they filled up the balloons and tied them to a truck. When he figured he had enough lift, they cut him loose, and he rocketed out of the yard at about 500 feet a minute, so fast, in fact, that he dropped his gun.

Larry was spotted at 16,000 feet by more than one jet flying by. He might have left the planet altogether but the balloons started to pop because of the altitude and he began his descent. Now he should have hit the pavement at about 200 mph but this didn't happen. He came down fairly gently and as he neared the ground he started to drift sideways and, as invariably happens when flying in a lawn chair at low altitude, he wound up tangled in a power line. It was a big one. This caused a significant power failure in the City of Long Beach, much of which went down in a shower of sparks. He should have been fried to a cinder but he was still uninjured, although he was dangling a good distance from the ground. Larry managed to free some of the lines with which he had tied the balloons and let himself down into the eager arms of the police. They subsequently threatened him with a \$4,000 fine but they didn't press it because, even though he went right through the flight path to the L.A. Airport, he was kinda loveable. He said his only regret was giving some kid the lawn chair before they hauled him off.

So I thought that on the 4th anniversary of Larry's flight we should go to the desert and fly around to commemorate this great achievement. Since we had time to think about the best method we struck on the idea of Parallooning. My cousin Will and I invented this sport in 1986 and I doubt if it has ever been practiced since. Will calculated that if we got about 18 full sized tanks of helium and 35 or so 10-foot weather balloons I could fly. We planned to load them into a parachute and if there was a



what you do if you don't have tv

balloon problem of any sort I would be in a deployed parachute. So we got a few friends of the sort Larry might know, along with my wife and babies, and drove to the desert at Panamint just outside of Death Valley. We had made arrangements for an RV and a truck loaded with helium tanks. We were a bit concerned that the tanks would explode in the desert heat but, amazingly, they didn't. We arrived at night and we planned to fly at dawn. You would think that someone would have checked out the parachute, but no. When we unfolded this relic, we discovered that someone had cut the shrouds off. We sent the truck back to town and in a couple of hours it came back with every foot of clothesline for sale in China Lake, and some that wasn't. We had been blowing up balloons all morning and as soon as we had the chute rigged, we started stuffing them in it. One of us (he will remain unnamed) had carefully calculated the lift, helium quantity and size of the balloons combined with the parachute capacity. This was the same guy who was supposed to check that the damn parachute had shrouds. We had plenty of balloons and helium but when we filled the parachute it could only have lifted a seven-year-old child. Luckily, we had a seven-year-old child. I asked my son Dylan if he wanted to play with nice Mr. Parachute. His mother was inside nursing baby Rowan.

We installed Dylan (unlike Icarus who went *with* his son) and began to play out a pair of ropes. We knew he was an inexperienced Parallooner so we held onto him tightly. Margaret ran outside, shaking her fist and yelling threats that if we lost her first-born she would make us rue the day. Mothers can be pretty touchy in the desert heat, so to calm her, my friend Dave went into the camper and came out with a carbine that we could use to shoot out a few of the balloons, thereby bringing the boy down safely in the unlikely event that we should let go of the ropes. When Dylan saw the gun he became confused and started to cry. Then things took an interesting course. A Winnebago pulled over and the people inside did not like what they saw. They got out and the driver accused us of using a little kid like skeet and commenced to berate us. We told him to bug off and that we had things in control but the driver continued to work himself into a lather. Then Dave had the presence of mind to wave the gun at the interloper and told him to mind his own business. He said we were with the University of California and were taking high altitude air samples. Way to go Dave, when you have no defense—baffle and confuse. The group took off but Dave grew overly paranoid that he might lose his pilot's license if this complainer went to the cops.

"Dave," I said, "you just drove off a citizen at gunpoint. I hardly think they will take your pilot's license." Besides, they had driven off

down a one-way dirt road to the abandoned town of Panamint, giving us plenty of time to beat it. We reeled Dylan in and when he was freed from the chair I put my leg in it to keep the rig from blowing away in the freshening breeze. Big mistake. I was immediately decked and the wind dragged me across the hardpan at a rather alarming rate. I grabbed at a bush and although I was stopped for a second Dave had a better angle on the balloons so he started shooting them out. This merely improved the lift so now I was being dragged upside down with my face in the dirt. I opened my mouth to yell and took in a mouthful of alkali dust. Was Dave nuts? Forget about me; I figured that eventually I would come to a mountain and what was left of me would snag on something but Dave was shooting right at the disapproving Winnebago in the distance. Finally they caught up with me and jumped on the chute.

We agreed that it was wise to leave at that point even though we still had quite a few balloons and at least a dozen tanks of helium. I still have the parachute if anyone wants to borrow it.

BYRNES BOILS, ALMOST

We could just imagine the headline. Jim Byrnes and I were in Yellowstone and we were flat-out amazed to see a steaming waterfall as we entered the park. We pulled over and decided to climb up the side to see where the water was coming from. Now Byrnes is a stylin' guy. He had on about \$400 worth of designer hiking clothes and looked mighty fine. So fine in fact, that when we got to the top of the waterfall he didn't want to go back down the way we had come since it would involve a certain ass-in-mud exit strategy, so he opted to stroll the 100 yards or so across the Yellowstone Artist Paint Pots™ while I slithered down to retrieve the car.

When Jim got safely to the wooden sidewalk on the other side he noticed signs in six languages explaining that he was a dead man, because there is a deceptively thin crust covering the pools of boiling water and if he didn't fall through, he'd rot in jail for a thousand years anyway for stomping footprints



byrnes contemplates the hereafter into this great natural treasure. Jim said looking good is worth it.

But if you bomb in one sport you can just go to the next one. I have always liked the opera. That is, I thought I liked it but it turns out that I liked the two my mother took me to as a kid. It has never really been as good since. We saw *Aida* in 1961, when Leontyne Price was the diva. She was a big deal in the world of opera but since opera has few followers most of you will say, “huhh?” I remember walking along the sidewalk in Los Angeles and, looking through a half-open stage door, I saw some palace guards in their Egyptian outfits. Right then I made it a vague goal to someday be a ‘supernumerary’ in the grand opera. A super is someone who shows up, stands around pretty much doing nothing and in this case literally carries a spear. I thought what a great job! Dress in a bald wig and leather skirt, shake a spear every so often and yell, “Huzzzah!!”

Many years later I met a guy who had been a super with the San Francisco Opera for years and this rekindled my interest. He gave me a number to call but told me that they don’t take easily to newcomers because some people aren’t committed and if you fail to show for a rehearsal even once they drop you. They sent me a form intended to measure my trustworthiness and I must have convinced them of my sincerity because I got a call a few days later. The director himself called and he seemed genuinely pleased that I wanted to take part. He assured me that I would be on stage for an upcoming production and I would probably even have more than one part.

The Opera House in San Francisco is a historic pile indeed. So many of the legends of opera have performed there as well as many others from Pete Seeger holding a hootenanny to the first meeting of the United Nations. The place is gigantic and balconies climb tier after tier from the dress circle seats, which can go for thousands of dollars for some performances, to the ‘alpine specials’ with the snoring husbands and students. And **now!** I was to be making my debut on stage.

I think I really impressed the director but then he said, “I think you might be confusing our opera company with The San Francisco Opera Company.”

“Excuse me?”

“This is the San Francisco Lyric Opera,” he said.

“Lyric Opera?”

“Yes, they gave us your name. We perform grand opera, but on a smaller scale,” he said.

Well, I had worked myself up for this so I said I’d do it. The next week I showed up at 16th and Capp Streets in San Francisco to start rehearsal of a fairly obscure yodel-fest called *André Chenya*. The

theater was a hundred-year-old vaudeville house and looked it. I had about four roles. In one scene, I was one of three judges whose job it was to turn and shake our heads in disapproval. We rehearsed like mad and invited all our friends but, still, opening night barely filled the first three rows and we were scheduled to do this five more times. By the third performance the orchestra went on strike for pay. Not higher pay, just pay. There were just three of them and they needed \$90 or they wouldn't show up. It looked as if we were through, but we passed the hat among the cast members and squeezed another night out of them.

Playing to a nearly empty house once is OK but I was looking forward to this being over. At half-time on the last night, I was standing outside the stage door on Capp Street with the other two judges. Capp Street is in the middle of the worst neighborhood you can imagine. Many of the buildings are boarded up and in this dark alley the crack pipes crunch underfoot. We wouldn't have even gone outside, except there were three of us, all about 6' 4", dressed in long black robes so we looked at least as scary as the locals. We stood under a 50-watt bulb that was trying unsuccessfully to push back the gloom, as a hooker rather nearer the end of her career than the beginning stumbled into view. She looked right at me and asked blearily, "Hey man, you wanna have some fun?"

Keep in mind we were wearing really bold stage makeup and white wigs which made us look more like torture chamber attendants than judges. I asked the woman, "Doesn't it bug you the way I'm dressed?"

"Honey, you can dress like Jesus on the cross. If you payin', I'm playin'." It was right then that I realized that a life in the opera wasn't for me. The final curtain fell and I decided to skip the cast party in favor of fitting the spare tire to my car. Someone had stolen one of my wheels.



Life may be a fatal disease but the short-term cure is adventuring, be it in an alley crawling with crack addicts or at the ends of the earth.

One of the great adventurers of all time is George Meegan. George is an Englishman who decided one day to go for a walk. He walked from Tierra del Fuego at the tip of South America to Prudhoe Bay, Alaska. It was an unbroken march that took him seven years and he walked every step of the way. He thought it would be just the thing to visit with the recently retired President Carter so he veered over to Georgia thereby stretching the path to 19,019 miles. He made this first grand trek in the late '70s and he is still walking today. I read his book,

The Longest Walk, 15 years ago and, over time, I told many people of his accomplishment. One day I looked him up online and sent him a note. I discovered he was teaching in Kobe, Japan and we developed the spontaneous friendship that generally occurs when two people of a similar lunatic bent find one another.

George said that he was planning to walk between the old Mushuau Innu village in the wilds of Labrador to their new village 18 km away



despair

around the first of the year, 2003. He asked if I wanted to come. I said sure, so off Rowan and I went to eastern Canada. The first of the year in Labrador always occurs (amazingly enough) in the dead of winter and that means snow, lots of it. With the weather, it took us three days and six hops to get there. Davis Inlet is 200 miles beyond the end of any road. It is an Indian village of about 550 and compared to where we had just come from it is a sad and colorless place. The government of Canada has done a commendable job of trying to help

these people preserve their old culture but the only vestige of the culture I saw was the fact that they speak the ancient language. All the rest is Pampers and snowmobiles.

These were among the very last people to abandon their lives as nomads in North America about forty years ago. The Mushuau Innu are Algonkian people from the middle of the continent related to the Crees and the Blackfoot, as distinct from the Inuit who were a later wave of immigration across the Bering Sea. The town was built in the '60s and looks like a trailer park fallen on hard times. The wells are polluted and the place has been thoroughly trashed although it looked clean enough all covered with snow. It is a desperate society because there is no work and the long winter nights bring drunken violence with the attendant problems of vandalism, teen pregnancy, suicide and a penchant to become extremely overweight. The saddest thing we saw was a 19-year-old girl holding a plastic bag of gasoline, which she was sniffing. It is a one hour, \$450 round-trip flight to the nearest liquor store.

George had been to the village before and he had returned with his daughter and several of his students from Japan. On this trip he brought the documentary filmmaker Franká Randall, Tony Briant, a full blooded Inuit from Alaska and the "Two Californians." George's goal was to

The Labradorian

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Around 50 people took part in a march from Davis Inlet to Natuashish on January 9 as part of an initiative organized by George Meegan. Mr. Meegan is introducing a program of education reform he has developed with culture as the fundamental component.

host a ceremonial walk with the children, the teachers and the village elders from the old to the new village. At first no one seemed to know exactly why we were there and as departure time came we were worried that they weren't buying our celebration of their new home. George wasn't worried,

though. Keep in mind that this man walked for seven years with no money and an unsteady command of Spanish until he was nearly out of Mexico. As the day came for our departure children poured from the houses. The school principal, the President of the Nation, the Royal Canadian Mounted Police and all the others began the trip as a mild blizzard set down on us.

We walked across the pack ice into the woods carrying flags of about 40 nations. I carried Mexico. By nighttime (about 3 p.m.), the band arrived at the new town. About half of the tribe had already relocated and we were welcomed into their homes. This is a 100-million-dollar town with streetlights, a brand new school and furnished modern homes.

Jim, the head man, got a phone call and announced it was time to hunt. Great I thought, hunting with Indians in the frozen north. We went out on his front porch and all of a sudden we heard a dull thumping sound as the caribou herd of perhaps 500 rounded the bend and poured down the street. Jim drew a bead and dropped one right in front of the house. Tony skinned it in the basement and a few hours later we were eating caribou stew and watching *The Simpsons* with the children.

The villagers rarely ever leave the area and even though they see plenty of TV they really don't see themselves as part of a larger world. Rowan and I had rendezvoused with George in a land where they have no dreams and no expectations. For a moment, George gave them a little spark of hope. A spark hard to kindle in this unforgiving country.

But it was time to go. In fact it was some days past time to go because we had been snowed in and wanted to go back home where the

color green existed. They will fly in some pretty hairy weather but the loader had broken down at the airstrip and without it they couldn't clear the runway of snow. We worked with the mechanic, holding lights and bringing him coffee. Finally he got it running, and the plane set down between storms. It would take us two days to get home and I really wanted



rowan and george laugh at ice

to make it for my 30th wedding anniversary. I had never paid much attention to that sort of thing but I thought it would be nice. So Rowan and I got home at 9 p.m. on the day and Margaret picked us up at the airport. I mentioned that we had made a pretty terrific effort to get home for the day and she just laughed and said, "That was a month ago."

I've never been good with numbers.



Chapter 23.

TRAIN WRECKS, EXPLODING WHALES & THE GREAT BRA BALL WAR

Some issues are far too important to remain neutral on. One such issue is the Great Bra Ball War.

Ron Nicolino had the brilliant idea of stringing some of his 14,000 bras across the Grand Canyon. Sadly, the short-sighted park people turned him down. Just think! The park would have finally gotten some respect. Then Ron met Emily Duffy and here the record gets sketchy. After their meeting, two competing bra balls emerged. Emily decided that she had the superior right to make a bra ball, because she claimed her supporters are “incensed by the thought of a man appropriating a creative idea from a woman, especially one about female body image.”



644.6 lbs., yeah, sure



1,287 at least

but Emily’s ball doesn’t look any 644.6 lbs to me.

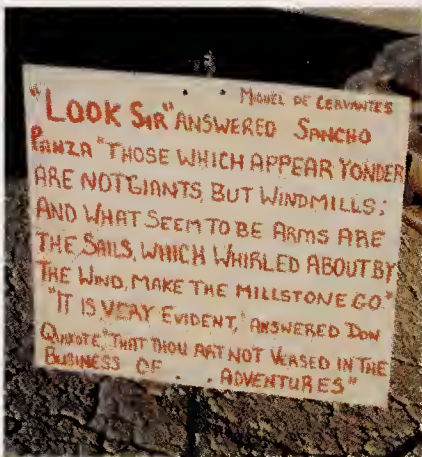
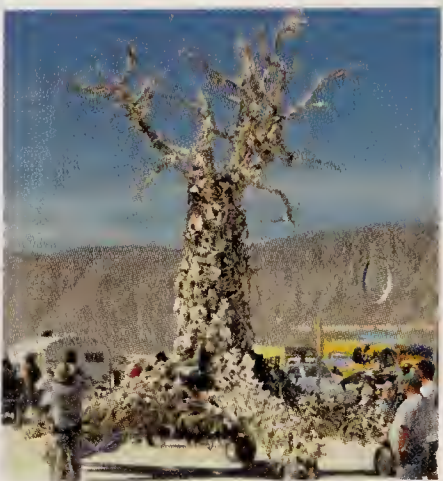
Well...all things being equal—but of course they aren’t. Ron claims that his ball was 1,287 lbs the last time he weighed it and Emily says hers is 644.6 lbs. This coming from a woman who suggested (according to Ron) that silicon ‘filler’ would be acceptable to make the ball bigger. I don’t know about you,

Last time I checked, the dispute was still with the lawyers but I’m confident that justice will prevail. Ron carries his bra ball around in a pink ’63 Cadillac El Dorado he calls the “Bramobile” and this certainly seems like the level of solemnity that this project deserves.

Burning Man

Burning Man is an art festival set in the desert, five days east of Reno by horse, or a couple of hours by car. Burning Man is so unlike

anywhere else that it might as well be another planet. 30,000 people show up and whereas it's true that several thousand might be wearing little more than a smile, many others are dressed in red paint or as fairy godmothers or as The Mothers of Invention or just about any other outfit you can think of. Thousands of bizarre vehicles tool across the alkaline hardpan, there are bands and ironic works of art sprouting up everywhere.



Participants install hundreds of spectacular things like *the piano bell*. Picture standing inside of a stack of 92 pianos with people crawling all over the outside, playing a hundred different arrangements of chopsticks all at the same time. Other participants create entire religions, which last just a week, complete with temples, rituals, priesthoods, penitents and scoffers.

At the end of the week, a gigantic wooden man is burned. I watched the man burn a few years ago, while standing in a crowd of thousands of people. I turned to the guy on my left and realized that it was an old friend of mine who I had not seen in several years. He said, "What are the chances of running into you here?"



ized that it was an old friend of mine who I had not seen in several years. He said, "What are the chances of running into you here?"

"Well, about 100%." I said. This a place where, potential—becomes. Burning Man had been around for decades and the 'old timers' lament that things are not like they used to be. But what is? First, we had the Renaissance in the 15th century, then Woodstock in the '60s and now Burning Man. You might have missed the first two. Don't miss Burning Man.



There are examples of high concept buffoonery in the government too, and I mean this in a nice way. Prostitution is a crime in San Francisco, but legal in Nevada. In fact, playing penny-ante pinochle is illegal in many places, but in Vegas you can sign over your house, your car and great-granddaddy's knitting mill, while drunk, to a bank that's located right inside the casino. This topic inevitably leads us to The Mustang Ranch, and of course the only way to get there is to go to Burning Man first. Or at least that's how I got there.

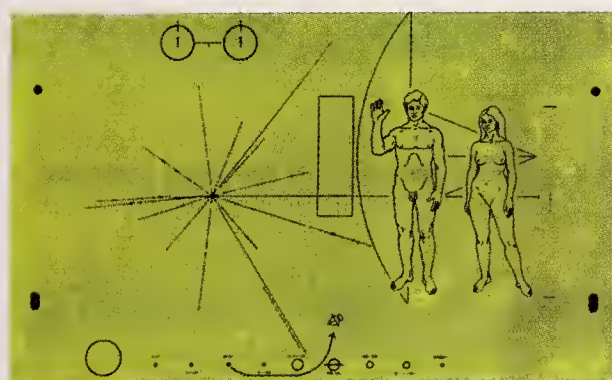
As the kids and I were driving back from Burning Man in a motor home, I told them that I had always wanted to see a certain fabled establishment, the Mustang Ranch. The ranch was the most notorious whorehouse in Nevada, and I pictured a six-story Victorian mansion complete with a wisecracking madam and rouged dainties parading along the porch sporting parasols and little else. In fact, rather like Burning Man!

What we discovered was altogether different. A signpost pointed us in the direction of the Mustang Ranch, but the pavement petered out at a sorry bunch of sandblasted trailers all bolted together to keep them from blowing away. I hoped that they admitted children. It turned out they did. The girls of ill repute had long since moved on to greener pastures, and the Federal government had seized the place for nonpayment of taxes and turned it into an *actual* mustang ranch, where people go to adopt wild horses. They didn't even have to change the sign.

I wonder how many men have stumbled out from Reno and come home with a pony.

U.S. Federal Adam and Eve in Space Program

Thirty years ago, American rocket scientists launched a small spacecraft toward Jupiter that they hoped would last as long as two years. It worked great and in a flyby of the red giant it sent back dazzling pictures and then with the ol' slingshot maneuver it accelerated past Jupiter and headed out of town. It never fell prey to spacecraft eating asteroids in the Van Allen Belt and it kept on working in minus 459 degree weather. The hotsi-totsi radiation belts surrounding



"i'll trade the woman for
25 milkyways"

Jupiter didn't phase it and it kept talking to us for three decades until January 23rd, 2003, 7,000,000,000 miles from here. (The final message was, "Send more comic books and beer!")

So off it went into deep space headed for the bull's-eye of the constellation Taurus. They will be rolling

out the red carpet on Aldebaran, the first star the spacecraft will pass by, in about 2 million years.

Carl Sagan was charged with designing a plaque to attach to the side of the Pioneer 10 to tell those who might find it where it came from, who sent it and when. It was controversial at the time. Some critics said we shouldn't tell aliens where we live but the loudest complainers were shocked that we would show a man and a woman in full frontal pants-free nakedness like a couple of skinny dipping hippies. I would never have sent them naked. They should have been wearing Aloha shirts and shorts with cameras around their necks and I would have tossed in a couple of nose picking kids with speech balloons, whining, "Are we there yet?"

Of course, most governmental activities aren't meant to be funny but some work out that way. Back in 1982, a dead whale washed up on an Oregon beach and the state highway department was charged with removing it. It was ripening fast, as only a whale can do, and a big whale calls for a big pile of dynamite. A half a ton, in fact. I've used my share of dynamite and I can testify that a half ton is plenty to do a job on a whale. The crew in charge had the good sense to film the event, including the sound of the cameraman running for his life as 1,000-lb chunks of blubber descended on the crowd, crushing cars and splattering everyone for a quarter mile in all directions. The idea had been that it would be blasted into tiny pieces and all these little bits would be hauled away by the seagulls. They hadn't counted on the shock wave killing quite so many seagulls. They thought it was hard to pick up before...

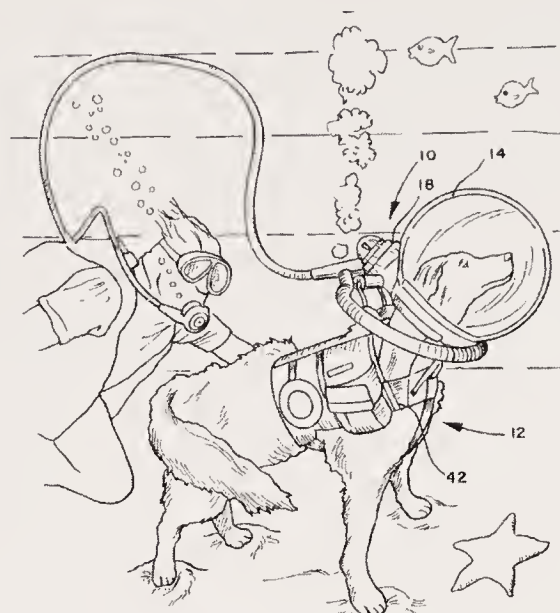
There are millions of examples of this sort of lighthearted playfulness in government agencies. The best example is probably the US Patent Office. Nearly 7 million patents have been issued in this country and the web site has at least 200 million pages. The layout is so arcane and difficult as to be pretty funny in and of itself. The URLs run to hundreds of characters and the pictures (which are supposed to be in the public domain) steadfastly resist printing as if they have been drawn in disappearing ink. I spend as much time there as one reasonably can, searching randomly through the patents for gems.

United States Patent
March 27, 2001
6,206,000

Canine scuba diving apparatus

Abstract The invention is a special modified scuba diving apparatus intended for use by an animal, and more specifically the famous diving dog "Shadow." The invention includes a helmet, a harness for supporting the helmet and a source of breathable gas, a special regulator providing a supply of breathable gas to the interior of the helmet, an

exhaust for withdrawing exhaled air and residue water from the helmet without depressurizing the helmet, and a system of weights to compensate for the buoyancy of the user, and to counteract a net moment created about the center of buoyancy. The breathing system includes a muffler. An intercom system for providing voice instructions to Shadow can also be included.



"i hate this"

So *that's* where my TV time went!

Of course, those people we call foreigners have patent offices, too, and some are just as funny as ours. A nifty one comes from the files of the normally staid Swiss: www.dynamicmeeting.com. It's a dinner table that rotates 12 diners in their chairs, along with their plates, so that you can sit across from different people every few minutes. Someone actually built one of these, and it's priced at about 20 grand (tax and tip extra). Sounds like another great way to meet chicks!

Or you could just invest in the snappy red conference bike: www.conferencebike.com. It costs \$9,500 (but it only seats seven).



I was in Russia when one clever individual made front-page news with the notion that, since no one had ever patented machine-made containers, *he* could take out the patent. He was actually trying to patent bottles and cans. I'm sure they just shot him. In Russia, patent niceties are not really observed anyway, and since everything made there is so incredibly shoddy, the threat of them stealing world markets is slim to none. The Russians have taken the credit for inventing such things as the light bulb, jazz and radio. I'm pretty sure they didn't invent the light bulb and I think that an Italian dreamed up the radio, but I'm positively certain that they didn't invent jazz, even though they do know how to sing the blues.

There are lots of shenanigans in the patent world, like those still being pulled off by a dead guy, the arch villain Jerome Lemelson. Jerry held 550 patents, second only to Tom Edison. He and his staff studied original science, and anticipated devices that they thought might be invented in the future, then patented the rights to such devices, with the

intent to license the rights back to the eventual inventors. Even though Jerry has gone to that big courtroom in the sky, his legacy continues and his spawn are still at it.

Copyrights can be a source of hilarity as well. The song *Happy Birthday* was under copyright until 1998 but the owners were never able to collect, though they sure did try. If they had had more muscle, they could have gotten the FBI to bust in and round up entire truckloads of felonious 1st graders about to blow out the candles. I can just see the prosecutor submitting a mashed cake and burned candles marked "Exhibit A" as he tells the jury that an example must be made of these miscreants. (Prosecutor glances at a row of children in orange prison jumpsuits and manacles.) "Ladies and gentlemen of the jury," he intones (as he levels a finger at the kids), "it starts with the theft of *Happy Birthday* and before you know it, these criminals are illegally scuba diving with their dogs."



One hobby of mine even more fraught with danger than the patent wars is collecting train rides. Whenever I find myself on a train, I generally ask the driver to let me take it for a spin. A remarkable number let me drive; you would be surprised how easy it is to pry a door open with a \$20 bill. Naturally, I think it very wrong for them to let me get away with this. I have found that they will not let you drive the train in England, Japan, Santa Barbara or Russia. Grease the engineer in Vietnam, Thailand, Brazil, Italy and Egypt and it's off to the races!

I can sure see why they don't want you to run the train into Santa Barbara. I was driving north of town in 1969 and came through the Gaviota Pass tunnel in my Morris Traveler when I hit a wall of coastal fog. On my right was a tremendous train wreck, and I shook my friend Dave awake (the Dave who would end up lost forever in a Peruvian



"freight train, freight train, going so fast"

prison, not the rifle-waving Dave) and yelled, "train wreck!" He was a bit slow in coming to, and before either of his eyes came into focus we had passed it. I thought about it for a day or so and because our medical condition at the time was likely to include hallucinations (after all, we

were hippies), I wasn't sure if I had seen it or merely imagined it.

Dave and I drove back the next day and, sure enough, we found an entire wrecked train, which had taken the curve too fast and fallen off the tracks. The train had been loaded with three levels of new cars and they were all wrecked along with the train. It was a wreck full of wrecks that took months to torch apart. At the same spot, a dozen shells were lobbed by a Japanese submarine in 1942, sending the entire West Coast into a panic. All this happened just a few miles from UC Santa Barbara, where rioting students burned the Bank of America during the anti-war protests in the fall of '69. I've always thought this stretch of coastline to be a fairly dangerous neighborhood.

The primary reason people ride trains in the U.S. is because they are afraid to fly. I have never been involved in a plane crash, but I can tell you that I have blown the horn on two trains that no longer exist. If they are letting the passengers drive, it is no wonder these trains fall off the tracks with some regularity.

The family and I once took the Edinburgh Express from Paddington Station in London to Edinburgh Station in Scotland. This was a train in which you parked your car and then spent the night in the inappropriately named 'sleeper' while the train engineer careened wildly around the curves, hitting speeds of over 110 mph, like some teenager in his old man's Corvette. I had been around a train or two, and had seen what could happen when you load too many automobiles on board and whip around the corners. I was pretty sure that if the engineer put this baby up on two wheels, we were in for it. No way was I sleepy. I kept getting up and looking nervously out the windows, picturing some unsuspecting villages getting creamed with us as the creamor. I harassed the conductor, whose patience had become visibly threadbare by the time the engineer finally slammed on the brakes in Edinburgh Station.

"So long, guv. You see, it was no problem at all," he told me smugly.

Four days later, that tight little smile was wiped from between his rosy cheeks when the train took an unscheduled trip off the tracks, careening sideways through a small village. ("Just a layover, guv!") They really should have let me drive.

I loved the Express from Cairo to Luxor. Now *there* was a train. *Was*. They used to have a nifty dining car, which looked like it had been left over from some Agatha Christie movie. Dylan and I were happily anticipating a grand dinner, and although we hadn't brought dinner clothes, we were pretty sure they would serve us. After all, we were first-class passengers. Well, they might have had the bad sense to let me

drive the train earlier in the day, but they weren't so stupid as to risk spots on the tablecloths so, after drinks, they told everyone to return to their staterooms where we would be served dinner on our laps. I tried to toss the chicken bones out but there was no way that window was going to budge; the windows were welded shut, so we couldn't let the cool air out or the train robbers in. In 2002, the train caught fire when someone tried cooking in a stateroom. And cook they did: the wind-fed blaze roasted 383 people. The engineer had no clue what was happening until the porter failed to show up with his chicken sandwich. He was probably busy showing some tourist how to slow down around the curves.

Travel by limousine is safer, although if it isn't your limo you can't always predict where you will end up.

Niche Businesses

I always admire folks with niche businesses. I met a guy who cleaned rain gutters while going to Stanford to make ends meet, because his father thought it would 'build character.' This kid later became the rain gutter-cleaning king of America and makes far more than his father, the doctor. I met a man recently who keeps pigeons out of grain silos. He said he is famous for it. Famous if you happen to own a grain silo, that is. This is a completely bulletproof business with plenty of government regulation to keep him in clover if he keeps the flying rats out of the corn. Another man I met has a successful business brokering dirt for contractors. He sells holes, too. He actually sells holes. Nice.

And then there is Steven Flynn, who built an empire by cleaning restaurant grease hoods. Kitchen grease goes three places: into the sewer, into your arteries and into the hoods above the stoves. Steven and these other fellows keep our world tidy. Trades like this are entirely glamour-free and competition is often nonexistent. "Hey, I think I'll compete with Steve and clean greasy restaurant hoods all over the nation." Or not.

So there Margaret and I were with Steven and his girlfriend Miss September (or was it January?), lounging in Steven's limousine on our way to see the Rolling Stones. Everything paid for by grease. I didn't know Steven very well back then, and I wondered how seriously to take the notion that he had backstage passes. I had seen the Stones twice before: once at Altamont where we were so close to the stage that we had an excellent view of the guy pulling out a gun and the Hell's Angel who stabbed him in the heart (the Hell's Angels had been paid in beer to guard the stage); the other time I took the kids, and our seats were so high up in the Oakland Coliseum that we were escorted there by ushers dressed like Nepalese sherpas.

Steven assured me that these special passes would get us back-

stage. Maybe, I thought. We pulled up to the back door of the Coliseum and a woman escorted us into the concert, which was already in progress. We wandered out front and as we encountered guards protecting the costlier seats they prepared to pounce on us, only to shrink back when they saw our passes. Closer to the stage, the guards grew larger and meaner, but they stood aside to let us pass. Steven was leading his people to the promised land, and these toughs fell back like vampires from sunlight. We were standing on the steps next to the stage when Mick climbed aboard some pointy-out ramp affair that extended over the audience. He was far beyond us. Meanwhile, we kept moving and soon found ourselves alone, backstage with the stagehands and electricians. They looked at us quizzically, but just kept on mixing sound.

We had gone so deep into rock n' roll that we were now behind Mick, who was now dangling out over the very seats we had been assigned. After about fifteen minutes, Steven said, "Don't you think we've been here long enough? Let's go." The rest of us were amazed, except for Miss July, who seemed to be busy with some inner dialogue of her own. So after about five songs we found ourselves headed down the freeway in the limo for a jazz bar in Palo Alto, where some tired transvestite ground out a few pounds of Billie Holiday for the ten or so patrons. Everyone else was at the Stones concert.

I know what you're thinking. What has any of this got to do with anything? Well each experience is a part of the whole. Life happens randomly, doesn't it?

Instead of this book, I had initially planned to write a very linear book called *California From 500 Feet, A Story of the Coastline*, but it just wasn't me. It all began in 1998, when I had the idea that it would be nice to fly along the California coast in a blimp and write up the trip in a book. Although I could commandeer a train without much problem, procuring a blimp turned out to be far more difficult. First, there are only about ten large blimps in the world and only one that seemed suitable. It was the blimp that Tommy Hilfiger had leased for about a million bucks a year; at 200 feet, it was the largest blimp in the world. So I called up the Hilfiger people and asked if I could borrow their blimp for the trip.

Big blimps need a crew of about 20 and are slow, noisy and hard to park. In other words, perfect. I have friends who produce a popular TV show called *Bay Area Back Roads* in San Francisco, and they agreed to come along for the odyssey. We would fly along the coast from the Tortilla Curtain at Tijuana to the Smith River at the Oregon border. The TV people would film a show from the air and I would write a book about the story of the journey, weaving in the history of the coast. I had done a good deal of research about the coast, and we planned to have

interesting people aboard the ship during the voyage, like Chuck Yeager, Paul McCready and Burt Rutan. Jack LaLanne agreed to do handstands on the sand as we sailed over the beach at Morro Bay. We would zoom in on the naked hot-tubbers at Esalen in Big Sur and scare the kids necking on lovers' lanes all the way up the coast.

This sounded pretty good to the Hilfiger folks and we were zeroing in on a date when I got a phone call. The woman I had been dealing with from the Hilfiger camp said, "We're getting rid of the blimp."

"Getting rid of the blimp?" I repeated. "You can't do that. When is this supposed to happen?"

"Thursday," she said.

Damned inconvenient, but not an insurmountable problem. I would just follow the blimp. Indeed, it showed up a few weeks later at the blimp port down the road at Moffett Field, where it was being repainted. *Colleges.com* had leased my blimp, and planned to use it to promote their web site. I convinced the *Colleges.com* founder to drop in for dinner at Buck's, and then I laid out my detailed plan for a national TV special and a book. We would need the blimp for a mere three days. The trip would give *Colleges.com* a huge national audience. The *Colleges.com* guy said that he thought that it was a great idea...for me, but what could I do for him?

"Whaaa...? Am I missing something?" I thought. "Isn't the whole—absolutely the entire—idea of having the blimp to attract publicity?" He explained that he was looking for more of a college-focused audience and proceeded to fly off with my beautiful blimp. It made perfect sense to me that they would blow a million a year on a blimp. I certainly would if I could afford it, and even though I was a just a bit miffed that they would spurn my generous offer to borrow their blimp. I forgave them because they were rich and crazy.

One day my blimp will be back and Jack LaLanne and I will be ready.



the protesters are being paid by the rodeo organizers to picket. That's what I'd do if I was in charge. If I ever find out that such a thing is indeed happening, I'll march into the office and demand my cut.



Buck's is located right in the heart of an authentic Old West town. We have hitching posts right up front and there is generally a horse or two tied up to it. Many of my friends still carry firearms in plain view. Some even have badges, so they are entitled to do so. One morning a friend of mine who is with the DEA came in wearing a sad blue suit. Now, when he wears a suit, it means he's packing. That same morning four plainclothes detectives from the Sheriff's department were sitting at a table near us.

"Hey, Rob," I said, "show me your piece."

"I can't do that, Jamis," he said.

"Oh, come on," I persisted, "If you show me yours, those guys over there might show us theirs." Rob looked over and recognized the detectives. Then he slowly opened his coat, revealing the handle of a .32 at his belt. I looked over at the detectives and arched an eyebrow. Three of them slyly opened their coats; glints of gunmetal winked across the tables. Cool. A room full of guns and they're all on *my* side.



I like to pull jokes on friends as long as the jokes are practical. A practical joke generally requires several props and at least one government agency. My friend Roxy Rapp, Mr. Palo Alto, was astonished one day to find the downtown plastered from end-to-end with missing person posters featuring him in the buff, which I had snapped at the gym. The police caught us as we were putting them up, but let us go after we gave them some to post at police headquarters. Roxy deserved it; he had pulled his share of stunts on me. Like the time he knew I had a serious leak in my



**HAVE YOU SEEN
THIS MAN?**

**IF LOCATED
SUBDUE WITH
JELLY DONUTS
(RED JELLY
ONLY)**

**RETURN TO THE
SLEEPY DAZE
SANITARIUM**

**PLEASE COME
HOME WE
LOVE YOU**

boat. He phoned me up, impersonating the harbormaster at the marina, and told me that my 40' powerboat had sunk, pulling the dock down with it. He must have felt prophetic when it actually *did* sink a few days later.

The Wrath of God

A while back (hopefully long enough ago that we can't be prosecuted for the...aahhh...*the incident*, Roxy decided to go to war with the pigeons. These little bums plagued the rooftops of his buildings by leaving their calling cards in generous abundance. It seems these winged rats are considered vermin by some people and national treasures by others. In some places, pigeons have been granted the same kind of protection as condors. In certain other states, however, they haven't been granted immunity from prosecution and it was from one of these states that Roxy managed to secure a secret weapon to rid himself of these scoundrels. There exists a type of chemically treated grain which, when eaten, messes up a pigeon's onboard navigation system. After chowing down, they fly off into the sunset and can't find their way home to creep back into the air conditioners.

Up on the roof, we ladled out an unhealthy dose to all comers, and they gobbled it up like Nebraskens at a cruise ship buffet. The next day we returned to inspect our work. The pigeons were gone! *Halle-damn-lujah!* We went downstairs to celebrate and were more than a little alarmed to see a disheveled mob of drunken pigeons staggering along the sidewalks and into the streets. People were slamming on their brakes (or not) to avoid them and the bleeding hearts were rounding them up and taking them to wild bird repair shops (such things actually exist in California). Chaos reigned. It was entirely Old Testament.

Roxy was worried that this plague of pedestrian pigeons would be traced to his door. We were hard at work on a list of excuses when everyone's attention was suddenly diverted. Roxy, his wife Michelle and I were standing on the sidewalk, watching the pigeons tango with the traffic, when the earth started to shake. The shaking would later be called the 1989 Loma Prieta Earthquake. Windows shattered, cars slid all over the streets. We were in front of a china shop and all, I mean *all*, of the china hit the deck. If there is one place to be during a major earthquake, take my advice and stand in front of an expensive china shop. The terrific boom of buildings crashing into one another was astounding and then all was silent except for a few distant car alarms and some fool yelling that this was "God's wrath upon you," over and over until someone smacked him.

Some government-sanctioned pranks have been around for so long that we forget how funny they are. Try carving Mt. Rushmore today or

perhaps donating a fountain like the Fontana del Nettuno in Palos Verdes. Hey, it's *art*, man! Remarkably, the fountain is still there. It makes perfect sense that the town fathers and mothers would promote breast-feeding. But peeing in public? Plus, the figleaf was not original



"hey lookout, youzguys-
these are my new
shoes."

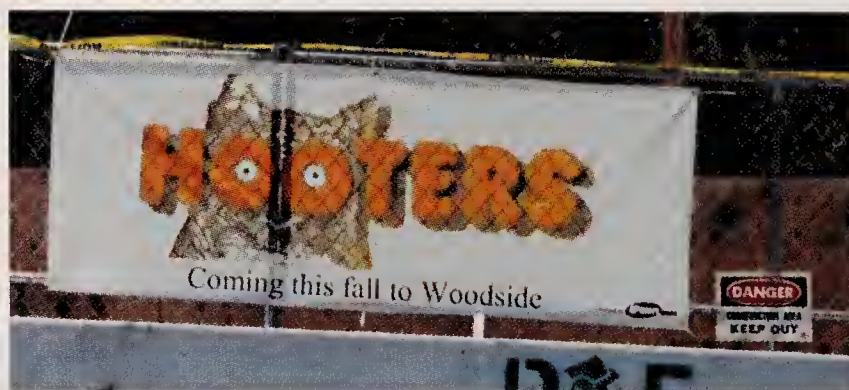
A great gag is the old Stanford maternity hospital. I was driving down the street one day without my glasses. As I picked and probed at the traffic with my



bumper I looked up at the blurry image of the hospital and was happy to see that the architects had designed the building as homage to motherhood in a most graphic and fitting manner.

And Speaking of Hooters

A hooter might be an owl benignly sitting on a rafter in a barn, relentlessly swooping down on good Farmer John's bad little mice and thereby keeping the family farm from being seized by the heartless, fancy-pants bankers who continually force this hardworking yeoman to overextend his measly line of credit as he barely scrapes up enough to keep his rheumy-eyed children in hand-me-down flour sack dresses. Or hooter could mean something else. One weekend, someone (of course I have no idea who) hung a banner on the fence of a construction site surrounding an un-leased building in W^{OO}dside. The banner announced the new tenant. Woodside is not exactly the sort of town that would welcome a restaurant specializing in teenage girls serving beer and curly fries in orange nylon short-shorts and tops too small to dry a kid's bike seat with. The sign looked pretty official, so on Monday morning the town's folk descended on town hall with pitchforks and boiling tar.



Oh, darn, I wanted curly fries! I would never be so crass and thoughtless as to rile up either city hall or the pitchfork and hot tar people because I certainly don't want to waste anyone's time. Unless, of course, the joke is just too good to pass up.

I own a really, really big fish named Woody who is now the town mascot. Woody is a 21-foot long silver salmon carved from a redwood log.

When I first got Woody, I discovered that you can't just permanently plunk a giant fish in the middle of town without a proper meeting. The city officials told me that, barring serious objections at a public hearing, they would allow the fish to be located prominently in front of Buck's. Public hearings in Woodside are often serious affairs as there is usually a spicy controversy that brings out both sides.

When I was called upon to present my petition, I stated that I had caught a very large fish and wanted to locate it in front of the restaurant. With that, I had two of my boys pull out two 10-foot-long sleeves from my jacket with realistic rubber hands attached, to illustrate Woody's length. The room fell as silent as a boarded-up spat factory. I had counted on a big laugh track, but they just stared at me. No one said a word. No one moved. I had no idea how to get the hands back inside my sleeves, so I sat down. My hands were still 20 feet apart. The seconds ticked by and then one of the planning commissioners calmly discussed the matter and they passed the application with no mention of the performance. Then I turned and left, with the boys trailing behind me with my overlong arms.

I was completely mystified by this strange turn of events. There were at least 75 people in the room and not one of them laughed. I was so convinced that the hands thing would bring down the house; I had no idea why it misfired so completely. The next day I spoke to one of the commissioners, and I asked him where I went wrong. He laughed. *Now* he laughs! When my hands started to stretch farther and farther, he explained, it looked so real that everyone was in shock. No one could figure out exactly what was happening and when they finally did

catch on, everyone waited for someone else to laugh first, but then the moment passed.

Humor is not without risk.

Today, Woody sits next to the creek where this very species of fish used to leap up-stream back to the



coach t with 'joltin' joe dimaggio

spawning ground, avoiding the rocks, bears and Indians as best they could. Woody was carved around 1900 by Enoch Kadashan, a Tlingit (Tlingit is pronounced by holding the tip of your tongue between your teeth) Indian from southern Alaska. The Tlingits had a long tradition of carving great seagoing canoes and they were one of the tribes who popularized the totem pole. Enoch was the first Native American to own an automobile franchise by becoming the first Studebaker dealer in the Pacific Northwest back in the '30s.

The Tlingits and their neighbors, the Haidas, are two of the five linguistic groups that comprise the Pacific Northwest Indians. It was because of Woody and Enoch that I thought I had better throw my weight into the Starbuck's fray. In April of 2003, Darin Swanson, co-owner of HaidaBucks Cafe in a village of 700 people on an island 400 miles north of Vancouver, was slapped with a cease and desist complaint from Starbuck's for trademark infringement. The 'Bucks' part of the name refers to 'men of the first nation of the Haida people.' This is the same name of their basketball team. The legal crew representing Starbucks told Darin that he could use the term 'Haida' but he would have to drop the word 'Bucks.'

Starbucks made a big mistake. Short of their entire board of directors (and the lawyers) marching overland in snowshoes with gift baskets and prostrating themselves in the village square while the Starbucks CEO reads a heartfelt apology (louder, we can't hear you!), there will be a backlash in support of HaidaBuck's that will cause the brass at Starbucks to drink more than coffee.

There are hundreds, perhaps thousands of restaurants and coffee shops across the English speaking world and many of have been using the name Bucks in a "public and obvious manner" for years. I plan to round them all up and march on Seattle with the Indians, carrying (you guessed it) pitchforks and hot tar.

I have so much work yet to do and I haven't called Zsa Zsa in far too long.



impersonate yourself before others do

Chapter 25.

PACK-LITE AND OTHER THINGS I'VE LEARNED SO FAR

By now you realize what it is that I really collect. I collect life's ironic magic. Not magic as in the supernatural but *real* magic, the sleight of hand and mind that is meant to amuse. The important thing when collecting is to pack-lite. I have friends who collect planes, tanks, ships and husbands, but I know plenty of others who can put their collections in a small bag or smaller. Like Bill Goss. Bill collects near-death experiences. Bill is one of those cats who, having played the first nine, is now working the back nine. The list of his near-misses would fill a book and actually did; his first book on this very subject is called *The Luckiest Unlucky Man Alive* (soon to be a movie.) In fact, all of his books are about near-misses and because of this he has the sunniest outlook that you can imagine. The first time I walked past him at Buck's a few years ago, he grabbed my arm and said, "Hey, I'm going to be one of your new best friends." This from a guy who has some of the same friends since second grade. He was right.

Bill never set out to be a survivor but he *has* managed to come back from the edge in the most remarkable ways. It stands to reason that if you are the fuse man in a coal mine, the pilot of a carrier plane or a teenager who thinks himself bulletproof, you just might see the Grim Reaper grinning at you from time to time. But being hit by cars, blowing himself up, nearly drowning and crashing in one of the Navy's really BIG airplanes was nothing compared to the virulent melanoma that popped up a 1/2-inch from Bill's brain. This is the sort of diagnosis where they tell you to go home, take two aspirins and give your stuff away, because you have about a one percent chance of living through the expiration date of your trial subscription to *Reader's Digest*.

Well, someone has to be in that one percent and it was Bill. His current book is about Rocky, his pet flying squirrel who gave him the strength to get through some pretty hairy moments. Bill has seen the light at the end of the tunnel so many times he's getting a tan from it. Today Bill speaks professionally all over the world on the subject of survival. When Bill wakes up in the morning, the first thing that comes into his mind is gratitude. www.billgoss.com.

I collect all sorts of tangible things as well, from the first recording the lip-syncing Monkees made to the monkey-training module NASA made. In a world stuffed with stuff I've had to learn how to say a firm no when people offer me most things, because I used to accept almost anything.

Monkeys Rich and Poor

I know more than a little bit about monkeys, having been in the middle of a monkey war several years ago.

It was all an accident, but aren't so many wars? Margaret was a research fellow at SRI when we first came to California and I went to her lab one weekend to donate various bodily fluids to science (my, doctor, that's a big needle!). Between



bloodlettings I happened to wander out by the spider monkey cage. This was back in the old days when animals were treated like, well, animals. It was nothing to put 50 or 60 monkeys in a single cage and let them sort things out, like *Planet of the Apes* in reverse. Things have changed and today every lab rat now gets two weeks paid vacation *and* dental.

It was a Sunday and they didn't exactly have a social director for these critters so I was a welcome sight. The monkeys all clambered up to the wire and screamed at me to do something to break the monotony. I reached into my pocket, pulled out a shiny penny and put it in one of the little hands reaching out to me. The new millionaire ran to the top of the cage, waving his loot and shrieking in triumph. He was immediately beaten senseless by the entire tribe and another made off with the penny. Then the gang went after that one. It was amazing to see them rolling up their tiny fists and smacking the penny guy like a hairy bunch of doll-sized hoodlums.

Each time one was forced to give the penny up, the pack turned and beat on the next guy. In desperation I threw in a handful of change

and my library card. Then I ran away before the howling attracted someone.

In the vacuum of outer space, however, the screaming of monkeys and the howling of dogs can't be heard. Good thing.

When I was trying to shake NASA down for a space suit, they thought they could placate me by giving me the module used to train the chimp, Hamm, for space travel. Train him to do what, you



"nice monkey, go play in space"

ask? *Train him* to sit strapped from head to foot in a straightjacket and look out the window as Planet Earth got smaller and smaller, then die of a combination of thirst and terror. NASA had tried to donate the module to the San Jose Tech Museum but the offer was declined because explaining this program to school children was a bit of a problem and so they pawned it off on me. Stupidly, I took it.

The damn thing is too historic to toss out, too ghastly to display



sergeant spot to ground control

and is still full of monkey fur.

In Russia they used dogs in space but the dog space suits looked so terrible that the Russians ended up losing the space-race.



"here you starve da dog"

Tyler has learned from my example and collects lite stuff himself. He was a sophomore in UC Santa Cruz when he and some friends took to riding the rails outside of town. Even today you can hop a freight train in Watsonville and end up in Salinas, just like a scene out of a Steinbeck novel. Once he turned a fellow student on to the joys of risking life and limb by running from the 'bulls' (the train guards) and riding in a slow, filthy boxcar from one town to the next. He had just met this kid and the lad turned out to be Woody Guthrie's grandson. Woody, like Jack London before him, immortalized his life as a hobo on the road. And here was Tyler showing his grandson how to jump a freight.

Freight Train Blues

Written by John Lair, 1935.

I was born in Dixie in a boomer's shack,
Just a little old shanty by a railroad track,
The hummin' of the drivers was my lullaby,
and a freight train whistle taught me how to cry.

Chorus:

I've got the freight train blues, Lordy, Lordy, Lordy,
Got 'em in the bottom of my ramblin' shoes,
And when that whistle blows, I've gotta go,
Oh! Lordy! guess I'm never gonna lose,
The mean old freight train blues.

Now my Pappy was a fireman and my Mammy dear,
 Was the only daughter of an en-gin-eer,
 My sister married a brakeman and it ain't no joke,
 Now it's a shame the way she keeps a good man broke.

Chorus:

I've got the freight train blues, Lordy, Lordy, Lordy,
 Got 'em in the bottom of my ramblin' shoes,
 And when the whistle blows, I've gotta go,
 Oh! Lordy! guess I'm never gonna lose,
 The mean old freight train blues.

This was not the first time Tyler's life merged in a strange dream-scapy way with the mists of fantasy. I once asked Tyler to identify his peak experience in this world of ironic possibilities. He had trouble picking one. Right near the top, he said, would be the time President Fidel Castro asked him how he liked his stay in Havana and Tyler said, "Apart from eating a poisoned meat sandwich and my subsequent stay in the hospital, it was pretty good."

In a culture dominated by Adam Sandler and Eddie Murphys it is sometimes hard to realize that humor actually has other components beyond 'moronic' and 'scatological.' I guess it's what you imprint on at an early age because I still find Groucho Marx and Tom Lehrer wildly

funny. Everyone has heard of Groucho because of his movies, but I was more fond of his TV show, called *You Bet Your Life*. It was the wry lift of his eyebrows and his couthless commentary that caused Betty Friedan to call Groucho a "male chauvinist piglet."

A typical Groucho remark from his TV show:

"So, Mrs. Ludafisk, they tell me you're from Finland."

"Ya sure, Mr. Marx, but actually I'm from Lapland."

"Lapland?" Groucho's eyebrows jumped around like a couple of randy caterpillars. "Isn't that where good secretaries go when they die?"

It is not a coincidence that Fidel and Groucho Marx have been closely identified with the cigar. Or is it?

At the pinnacle of funny is the less-well-known Tom Lehrer. In the



early '60s he was a huge hit with his comedy records and concert tours. At the same time, he shoehorned in a gig at Harvard as math professor. Then, at the peak of his career, he dropped out of sight.

About ten years ago I heard that he was teaching math at UC Santa Cruz and I decided to phone up the campus to see if it was true. "Do you have a Tom Lehrer teaching there?" I asked the switchboard woman. "Hold, please," she said.

There were two clicks, and then a familiar male voice: "Tom Lehrer here."

They had put me right through and the man himself had picked up the phone. I was so taken by surprise that my jaw literally fell open and my mind went blank. I'm sure I said something perfectly stupid. Years later, my son Dylan ended up attending UC Santa Cruz and we decided to look for Tom's office with the intention of seeing what was pinned to his door. All of my boys had grown up with Tom's records and Dylan was a big fan of his as well. We were both pretty startled when Tom emerged from his office just as we approached. This time I was a bit quicker and asked him what was up. He said he was on his way to a rehearsal room.

"Any chance of us tagging along?" I asked. He thought not, but invited us to come to a student production of *Oklahoma* for which he would be playing the piano. I've never been a masher and was content to stand in the background and adulate but Tyler's arrival at the same university pulled us in a bit closer. Tyler wrote the following article that appeared in the UC Alumni Magazine:

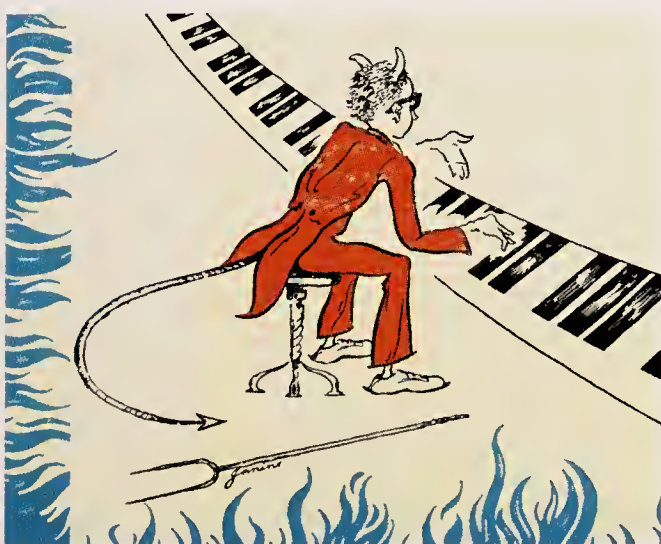
I Hope Tom Doesn't Read This

By Tyler MacNiven

I remember whirling around the living room wearing my parents' oversized clothes and listening to Tom Lehrer records. "I ache for the touch of your lips dear," he would sing as I would spin, "but much more for the touch of your whips dear." To say that Tom Lehrer's humor was formative in my youth would be to understate the case.

My father, something of a wag himself, drummed into us that there were two comic geniuses in modern times: Tom Lehrer and Groucho Marx. My older brother was always the brain and my younger brother the sports star, but it was I who could sing *The Masochism Tango*.

If you're under about forty-five you probably haven't even heard of



Tom Lehrer but in the '50s and early '60s he was a sensation. He made several albums and toured widely. He would play the piano and accompany himself in his distinctive nasal twang satirizing the events of the day. He predated Nixon, Vietnam and even swearing in public. He sang about 'the bomb,' college life, and excessive capitalism, Communism, and Catholicism. His more recognizable pieces are *Poisoning Pigeons in the Park* and *Oedipus Rex*. In *The Elements*, he furiously sings through the periodic table set to Gilbert and Sullivan.

Tom is Mark Twain with a piano. He was hip when the word hip was hip and there is a reason why every major record store still has a Tom Lehrer section. He's enduringly funny. Then at the height of his career he abruptly quit the life of a comic genius to teach mathematics at Harvard and later UC Santa Cruz. I was his last student. His sudden withdrawal from a successful musical comedy career was a mystery to many. During an interview on NPR a few years ago he was asked why he stopped performing and writing at the height of his popularity. He was reluctant to answer the question because, he said, the answer always failed to please. When pressed he said that the reason he quit was that as time went by he ceased to find things very funny.

When I first came to UCSC I asked a few people about Tom Lehrer and those I asked were not sure if he was still around. It was only by chance that I noticed his name in the course catalogue when applying for winter classes. The title of his course was: *Infinity, Concepts and Applications*. Hummm, a big subject, not exactly in my major, but the course was being taught by Tom Lehrer, the man who wrote the songs I had memorized in my childhood. I signed up.

On the first day of class I brought Tom a shiny red apple and placed it on the desk in front of him. He chuckled slightly then looked up at me and said, "Bribery will get you nowhere." I could not tell if he was joking. But I kept bringing in the fruit anyway. Next, a banana, then an orange. I



tom and tyler with fruit

planned to have the fruit become increasingly more elaborate each class, perhaps ending the quarter with a spike-fruit or a giant watermelon.

The day I brought the orange, Tom spoke about the Fibonacci numbers. He explained that this mathematical sequence appears

repeatedly in nature and he demonstrated with a pineapple, which he had marked to illustrate the mathematical concept. At the end of the class he handed me the fruit. "There, now we're even," he said and he politely asked me not to bring him any more fruit. It was clear he was not interested in my humorous renditions. Tom was focused on teaching math, although he did tell a few jokes. He would often depart from the

subject spidering through digressions within digressions, the thirty-some students either laughing or left scratching their heads. He never referred to his previous life other than to mention that he played the piano.

The class was actually quite interesting. We learned how zero point nine nine nine (on forever) equals one and why two lines of unequal length each contain the same number of points. More importantly, though, I got a good grip on the intimidating concept infinity.

Our final exam was on a Sunday at noon. I was not expecting it to take very long or to be particularly difficult. I was wrong in both cases. It took me the entire three hours, and I could have used more time. At 3:00 I looked up and realized that everyone else had finished their exam and left. I glanced over at Tom who signaled that the time was up. I slapped my pencil down and stood up. "So, I understand that this is your last class?" I said.

"Yes Tyler, it's been fifty years." He hesitated then went on, "I think I got my point across." At that moment I realized that I was Tom Lehrer's last student. Ever. I approached his desk and laid my paper on the stack. I wanted to memorialize the moment, to tell him how great he was, to bring forth some really fabulous piece of fruit. I wanted to tell him what a big impact he had on my growing up, that he is a genius, but I knew him well enough by now to realize that it wouldn't sell. I simply shook his hand and told him that it was a pleasure being in his class.

"You've been a good sport Tyler," he said. He then lifted the pile of exams under his arm, picked up his briefcase, and we both made for the door. At the door of the classroom he looked at the empty desks and said, "So long folks." And with that, he turned and left.



I endorse all candidates. Some guy came in one morning and told me that he was looking for my endorsement for his run on the governor's throne in Sacramento. "Yeah, so why would I want to do that? What have you done?"

"Well," he said, "I was mayor of Los Angeles for eight years."

"That isn't going to do it," I said.

He thought for a second. "I'm in the restaurant business."

"All right!" I instantly saw the possibilities and we hammered out a deal that if I threw my considerable support behind the campaign I'd get an ambassadorship.

Mayor Riordan practiced his acceptance speech on me: "Thank you my fellow Californians, for electing me Governor. Gray Davis has spent four years ruining this state and now it's my turn."

We discussed the famous lobster incident at his kid's restaurant, Gladstone's, the largest independent restaurant in LA. It seems that



lobsters for lunch

Gladstone's had this 30-lb New England lobster in a tank as a pet of the restaurant. It was older than almost anyone's grandmother and had been in residence for some years, placidly gazing at the Pacific horizon out the window.

Gladstone's is a massive place at the

beach in Pacific Palisades between Beverly Hills and Malibu so they get their fair share of movie stars. It came to pass that Mary Tyler Moore felt that it was cruel to keep this lobster in a tank when it could be frolicking off the coast of Maine with its great-great-grand lobsters. The Gladstone general manager told Mary he wasn't interested in sending the old critter home. Gladstone's was its home; moreover, they actually *EAT* lobsters in the place as **f-o-o-d!**

Mary was horrified and there was a dustup, which caught the attention of the vigilant Rush Limbaugh. Perennially famished, Rush offered to come out West and eat the lobster *in situ*. This was too much for Mary and she raised an army of forgotten TV stars (of which there are about 2.5 million in the L.A. area) who marched on Gladstone's. It began cutting into business, so Gladstone's finally threw in the butter-stained towel and told Mary that she could have the lobster (and here are some free lemons!). She took the lobster, left the lemons and arranged to fly the old girl home to live out her golden years but the lobster died on the airplane. I guess she should have taken those lemons after all.

Just When I Think I Have People Figured Out

One afternoon, two men came in dressed in the colorful clothes of competition bikers, with little mirrors attached to their glasses that let them see the road behind. They were obviously long-time friends, and Stan rubbed in the stinging loss he had just leveled against his friend Harry in a 20-mile race through the woods. Harry seemed inconsolable. I tried to cheer him up but he just slumped, frowning into his soup. "Harry," Stan said, in a heavy NY accent, "you really don't need a rear view mirror if I'm never behind you." Harry just looked at Stan and shook his head. I fully expected Stan to follow that remark

with something nice, but he just chuckled and ate his sandwich. It was darned odd.

As I rose to leave, Stan put his hand on my shoulder. "You don't understand," he said. "Harry and I have been friends for 60 years, ever since we were 10. I have a special status with Harry because I never made fun of him when we were kids. You see," he smiled, "my name is Stan Muscleman and this is Harry Lipschitz."

I turned to Harry. "Has life been hard with such a terrible name?" I asked.

"Hard?" Stan laughed. "Hard, the man asks."

"Sure, it's been hard," said Harry.

"So, errr, why haven't you changed your name?" I asked.

"Oh I tried," Harry replied, "but Stan always tells everyone my real name."

We both looked at Stan. "I promised his mother," he said, holding his palms up and shrugging his shoulders.

"Well Harry, maybe you'll beat Stan tomorrow."

"Yeah maybe," he said and I left them, shaking my head.

So after a lifetime full of surprises, I have come to some conclusions about things that are true, others that aren't, and some that are straddling the line.

Things that are definitely true:

1. Rats can come up through toilets.
2. Men lie about sex.
3. Women lie about their weight.
4. The absolute limit of Godiva chocolates that you can throw from first class to business class on United Airlines (before they will forcibly restrain you) while traveling between San Francisco and Madrid is twelve.
5. We definitely landed on the moon (and we took our car!).
6. Success is a better teacher than failure.
7. A real Scotsman doesn't wear underwear.

Common misconceptions:

1. The beaches of Rio are littered with millions of gorgeous women. The truth is that the women at the beach are generally fat and are so darkly tanned that they look like overstuffed teddy bears that have been shaved, greased and left to blister in the sun. The beautiful women hang out somewhere else.
2. A dog is man's best friend. Call a dog when you need to make bail.
3. Women want a man with a good job, a tight butt and a fast car, in that order. Actually, they want a man who will be nice to them above all else.

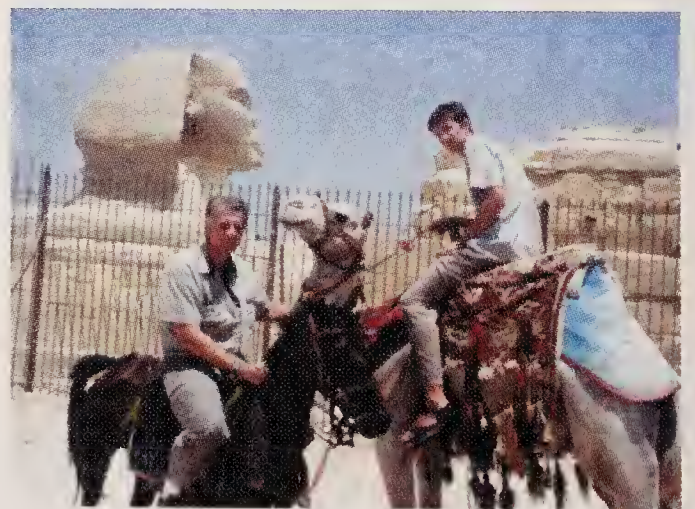
4. Redwood trees are the oldest living things on earth. I have owned cars older than the oldest redwoods. The bristlecone pine is by far the oldest.
5. Your neighbors regularly put terrible poisons, pins and razor blades in Halloween candy. Doesn't happen.
6. Lemmings commit suicide. Why on earth would they do that? Are they depressed?
7. The Parisians are generally rude and superior. It is true that they are superior in many ways but they are not particularly rude.
8. You can't buy things from museums. Think 'Russia.'
9. Woody Allen is funny. No. He's merely pathetic.
10. Public toilets are the ultimate harbingers of filth. It's true that some are pretty foul, but a study demonstrated that public telephones carry four times as many pathogens as toilet seats.
11. Red wine is good for you. Whereas a little red wine every day might reduce heart attacks, it also causes a lot of car wrecks, which are known to dramatically reduce life span.
12. Saints intercede on your behalf if you plead your case convincingly enough. Consider that a whole batch of saints was recently de-canonized, because there was no record of them having ever existed. (*Oh hell, there goes the Catholic market!*)
13. Dogs never, ever eat homework.
14. The magic words are *please* and *thank you*. No, the magic words are *Shazzam!* and *Abracadabra!*

Things that could go either way:

1. Charles Lindbergh's kidnapped son was never murdered but was raised by the kidnappers and now lives in San Jose.
2. Kevin Costner will have another hit movie in him. Hey, maybe he should option the Lindbergh story.

Funny things that might not be true but are so funny they should be:

1. Aliens come down to earth and take people back to the mother ship where they conduct some sort of anal probe and then return the victims home to their trailer park.
2. Quantum mechanics
3. The Chinese built a lighthouse in



brings a new meaning to
'blow your nose'

Rhode Island in 1412 when they discovered America.

4. Napoleon shot the nose of the Sphinx.
5. Tom and *Penelope* move to Woodside.



Chapter 26.

GRAND EXITS

Sometimes I plot my own disappearance. Haven't you ever wondered what would happen if you had a *really* big bag of cash and just slipped out of town? It would be fun to read the local papers to see if they would come looking for you. Or, if you faked your death, you could read what people had to say about you. Of course, there are two things that stop us from disappearing. Most of us have trouble getting the really big bag of cash and vanishing unexpectedly might hurt a lot of people's feelings.

Some exits are so spectacular that they are remembered for a long time. Three such exits immediately spring to mind.



"my coat and hat, por favor"

Socrates. He was forced to drink hemlock, the Greek poison *du jour*, because the local bigwigs thought him 'impious,' whatever that means. They executed the most brilliant thinker of the ancient world because of a theological disagreement. Hey, I thought Greece was

supposed to be this groovy democracy! The way I understand the story is that Socrates threw a party and said something like, "I'll be right back," and then it was bottoms up. He checked out more or less cheerfully because of his strong belief in the First Law of Thermodynamics (Newton would come up with the exact math two thousand years later). Basically, Socrates felt that since the Universe wasn't going anywhere, he was just taking a trip but you can see from the painting that his friends were a bit bummed.

Then there was **The Wizard of Oz**. He might have been a humbug and not a very good wizard but he was one all right guy. He generously offered to return Dorothy, an out-of-towner and not even voting age, to Kansas in a hot air balloon. He had no idea where Kansas was or if he found it how he would get back for work on Monday. I suspect he had more than a wizardly interest in Judy Garland who was far cuter as a teenager than as a boozy old nightclub act stitched into a sequined dress.

The War in the Pacific All Started Over a Misunderstanding

The Wizard of Oz came out in 1939 and was a pretty big hit. The dog Toto is a major character in the picture. One of the famous lines is when Dorothy wakes up in the Land of Oz and says, "Toto, I have a feeling we're not in Kansas anymore." She was right on the money.

The name of the largest manufacturer of porcelain bathroom fixtures in Japan is Toto. There were some Toto urinals installed at the airport in Yokahama and for a couple of years the few Americans passing through the men's room would be seen chuckling when they saw the TOTO label stenciled on the front. Hearing the laughter, Japanese men thought that their manhood was being mocked so they took out Pearl Harbor. After the war the movie was released in Japan and we all had a good laugh together about the silly mistake.

Thinking about this Oz business and recalling our Parallooning days, I thought it might be nice to blow up a balloon and sail away in this grand, if somewhat derivative, style. An exit like this would be so spectacular that I would have to actually stay away forever, because it would not do to come strolling on back and ruin the effect.

I thought that if I was going to escape by balloon I had better see what it was like floating off into the sky. So I mentioned it to a friend, who hooked me up with a balloon guy, who offered to come to Woodside and show me the basic elements of lighter-than-air. Joe Murray pulled into Buck's early one morning and he, Rowan, Tyler and I all headed off to a friend's ranch in the Santa Cruz Mountains above Buck's. We had a vague plan to inflate the balloon and see where the breeze blew us, not entirely unlike the Wizard himself.

If you have ever seen the ads for picturesque sunrise flights in Napa Valley, put all that sort of thinking away. Now visualize some crazy kid jumping off the roof of the barn, flapping homemade wings before flopping into the hog trough. Oh, and don't forget to add propane, flames, and, literally, the winds of fate. That's more like it. We filled the balloon with air using a gasoline-powered fan. The boys and I were amazed at how darn big it was. But not half so amazed as the horse population, which ran in wild-eyed frenzy for the far corners of the pasture. A final blast of burning propane and Rowan, Tyler, Joe and I lifted off for parts unknown. Balloons are not seen in our neighborhood very often. In fact, none had ever been seen in the area at all. We would soon find out why.

Hot air balloons are alternately very loud and completely quiet. When you hit the gas, a dramatic blast of flame shoots out and propels the balloon higher. When the gas is turned off, it feels as if you are

riding in a basket that is hanging from a silent cloud. The wind was with us in the most perfect fashion as we zigzagged down the ridge that day. With four of us packed into the basket, it was tight, but we were the kings of all we surveyed from our lofty perch. We sailed over cattle, horses and deer and they all ran as if the flame was singeing their very tails. Over the hills we flew toward the redwood forest.

We skimmed over a house and a blast of flame shook its windows, scaring the last few breaths out of the old woman who lived there. As we scanned for updrafts, we spied a car on the road below us. The driver was so fixated on the balloon that he spun out of control and nearly drove over the cliff. Tyler recognized the man who got out as the guy to whom I had sold a large piece of property. He had built an office on it, and it had bankrupted him. “Hey!” Tyler exclaimed. “Isn’t that Reggie Homer?” Before I could shush him, he started yelling, “Hey, Reggie, how’s it going?”



“hey, reggie!”

As we drifted along the ridge, I dialed friends on my cell phone, rousting them out of bed, and told them to look up. They shook their heads in amazement as we sailed by. The wind freshened and Joe demonstrated how to slow a balloon down. Just try to imagine how this might be done. Joe is a highly experienced pilot and, drifting near the treetops, he read the winds in the leaves the way a sailor studies the surface of the ocean. This allowed us to change course with the eddies that swirled unevenly along the ridge. But how to slow it down?

Simple. Joe called it “gathering evidence.” He vented some air and we descended into the trees. As we rose and fell like a vertical sailboat, he would pick a likely tree (tall conifers are preferred for their forgiving shape), and drag the gondola through the treetops. Smaller branches snapped off as we slammed into a tree, filling the gondola nearly as high as the flames as we plowed on through. We tossed out the incriminating evidence.

Joe told us that we should expect residents to phone the police. He said it happens every time in non-balloon territory. It seems that as a balloon flies along, it appears to the people below as if it is crashing as it disappears beyond the hilltops. We heard later that the reports came

flooding in. A few miles farther, we passed over our own house. Margaret and the dogs ran around below us like mice on a holiday. From the air, yard junk shows up vividly in a way never seen from the ground. I vowed to park the cars in neat rows thereafter. We had covered about 20 miles by that time and were rapidly leaving the area of likely meadows and heading toward a dark wood that ran at least as far as Kansas. We had already used half of our fuel. Lions and tigers and trees, oh my! Joe asked me where the next meadow was likely to be, but I had no idea.

Our ground crew had long since lost us, and we were headed for the great unknown. The Wizard had nothing on us.

The wind was picking up. Joe felt that we were going far too fast to land without at least some loss of life. He dropped us into a big oak tree, about 75 feet from the ground. Like a dolphin in a net, we were stuck. The line that runs from the top of the balloon to the gondola is used to pull the balloon out straight when you hit the deck so that the balloon doesn't fall on top of you. This crucial line had snagged on a branch and had no immediate plans to let us go. We were stuck in the top of the biggest, meanest, balloon-eating tree in ten counties. Joe yelled, "Cut the line!" Now this is a 5/8" Dacron mooring line and it definitely needed cutting. Otherwise, when we ran out of fuel, seven stories from the ground, the balloon would be a goner and so would we.

I yelled for someone to give me a knife but it seems that knives aren't standard equipment on hot air balloons. I always carry a single-edge razor blade in my wallet for, well, cutting stuff. I used it to good effect just then. The line parted with a crack and the wind swept us out of the tree. In an instant, Joe spotted a meadow in the near distance. It was long and skinny, but we were round in all directions.

"We're going to land in that meadow," Joe yelled to me. "When we hit, you throw Rowan out of the basket as far as you can, and have him grab the line to keep us out of the trees." And down we went. It was like trying to squeeze a five-story building into a church confessional. We pitched Rowan out, and he ran like he was being chased by a six-legged bear. He stretched that balloon out like the pro he immediately became. In a few minutes, park rangers and police converged on us and helped us haul the rig to the main road. Half the cops wanted to give us commendations for valor and half wanted to arrest us for child endangerment, but since we hadn't violated the letter or even the spirit of any laws, they let us go.

Eventually we found our ground crew and converged on Buck's for breakfast. We ordered double of everything. Halfway through our second stack of pancakes, I asked Joe what he thought about the flight.

“Well,” he said, “that was my 512th flight. I’ve flown over the Alps with helium and across the Sahara with anhydrous ammonia. I’ve even landed in a swamp surrounded by cottonmouths and alligators, but the flight we had today was the hairiest one I have *ever* had.”

“Way to go, Joe!” High-fives and battle ribbons all round.

Clearly, my imagined disappearance via hot air balloon had some serious drawbacks. The test flight only made it just beyond our house in ninety minutes and used more than half of the propane. I would need a much bigger balloon, fewer people, a crazier pilot (unlikely), the right wind and the undeniable fact still remained that the whole thing had already been done by the Wizard back in ’39.

Far more terrific was **Harry Maitland**’s exit. Harry owned a company that made aircraft components, and he had amassed quite an air force of his own. No twin-engine Beechcrafts or fancy Lears for Harry. He went for the orphan craft, the really oddball stuff. Harry’s first plane was a half-completed homemade biplane, which he finished and flew at the age of 17. When I first met him, he had just imported a Paris Jet, a



harry reaches for the sky

frighteningly fast plane the French military used to run from their enemies. But Harry’s gem was an F86 Sabre Jet. This was a U.S. Air Force fighter plane built in the late ‘50s, and was one spiffy plane, the Apple II of its era. It might have handled like a 1952 Plymouth but it has remained stylish in the timeless fashion of an Air-

stream trailer or the early T-Bird. Harry delighted me by carrying a picture of my son in his back pocket. It seems that Tyler and his daughter had gone to a high school prom together and it was that picture he kept in his wallet. At first pass, Harry came off as a little gruff, with his walrus mustache and furrowed brow, but it was just an act. He was a passionate friend, a great lover of life and a man who put his family first and everything else second.

It is for all this that we miss him so much. But the man made a hell of an exit. We should all be so lucky.

Harry’s factory was next to the local airport. Every few months, I would drop by because he was always working on some new project. When they banned jet skis on Lake Tahoe, Harry bought a speed boat that, on a calm day, would do 140 mph. Harry would sometimes

commute to his hillside home in a small Bell helicopter and he took me in it whale spotting off the coast once.

While visiting Harry at his hanger one day to ask his advice on where to have some special painting done on my car, I noticed he seemed to have developed a speech impediment. I asked him what was wrong and he said he felt perfectly fine but had begun to experience trouble forming words. He said the doctors didn't know what was wrong and that he would just put up with it until they could figure it out. He looked worried but he kept coming to work even though it soon became a real effort. Harry and I had always been friendly, but never really close until that moment when I reached out and hugged him. The next time I dropped by, this time to show him how his advice had resulted in the strange and wonderful paint job on my car, he was worse. He was still plugging away, though, and his mind was clear. Neither he nor I talked about his condition. I was there to ogle his toys and that's what I did. A few weeks later, I got a call from a mutual friend who told me that Harry had a progressive, untreatable disease and that this capital fellow would be leaving us sooner rather than later. Harry had always been such a vigorous consumer of life that it was alarming to see life consume him. Most of us have had brushes with death to one extent or another but the effect generally doesn't last very long.



After we are done being amazed that we made it through childhood, we're amazed all over again that we are making it through adulthood, although some of us get picked off due to bad luck or simple stupidity. My buddy Neil and I once met at the Sacramento River Delta to try out a racing boat Neil had been working on. Neil is so casual about safety that his life has real potential as a Superfund site. I went to visit him at home once and he was busy removing a dump truck from his master bedroom. "It just rolled away in the night. I can't explain it," he said nonchalantly.

So I wasn't surprised when Neil's boat had the requisite, gigantic engine but had no registration and since it wasn't legal there was no reason to bother with niceties such as fire extinguishers, life vests, mooring lines and all that. The beast was fast though and we were soon far from shore. A chart would have been an enhancement but before I could fret over being lost I felt water at my feet. We were sinking, fast. I have always thought of the Sacramento River as just a river. If you sink you just swim ashore but where we were, the river was so wide we could hardly see land. Neil suggested that I look for the leak and I

discovered that the drain plug was missing. “Just stick a sock in it.” Neil yelled over the howl of the big V8. It was fun, sort of. Then we spotted a ski jump in the distance. We were doing about 70 mph and it looked as if we could just sail neatly over it and float down on the other side.

I asked, “Should we go for it?”

“It looks doable,” said Neil. But as we came closer some primitive part of Neil’s brain took over and he veered off. Somehow, we made it back to the marina and pulled the boat out of the water.

We watched as the next boat was launched. It was what they call a *picklefork* as it has two bows and these boats generally feature a humongous chrome-incrusted, turbo-charged race car engine. An argument was in full swing between the boat owner and the guy running the launch. This vessel looked brand new and it must have cost 75 grand easy. It was severely overloaded (even by our standards) with ice chests, TV’s and all the stuff for a day on the delta and this was the focus of the argument. The yardman didn’t want to launch it and have it sink at the dock. After a little more screaming the owner prevailed and the boat was carefully laid in the water. With two bikini-clad, magazine-quality dates, the guy got in and, still fuming, hit the gas. The pickle fork took so much backwash over the tail that it sank stern first within a couple hundred feet, much to the amusement of the bystanders.

“Hey Neil, is that guy stupid or what?”

We had had a pretty good day, especially considering we had survived. Neil stayed behind to work on his boat and I drove home through Berkeley along the bay. This is the very bay where Jack London had been an oyster pirate a hundred years earlier. Every time I drive that stretch, I recall Jack’s huge, short life.

When Jack got busted by the cops for stealing oysters, he switched sides and became an oyster policeman, chasing down the pirates. He then shipped out on a rough-and-ready brig to the Aleutians to hunt seals, which became the basis of his novel, *The Sea Wolf*. Returning to California, he joined a ragtag army of Spanish-American War veterans for a march on Washington, riding the rails both ways. Then he came back and went to high school. He soon dropped out and went to UC Berkeley. He was just nineteen. A year in college was enough for Jack so he quit and quickly became the most famous and highly paid American writer of his age. Over the next few years, he drank to excess, ate into insensibility and speculated with abandon. In spite of his wealth he could barely keep the creditors at bay.

Jack wrote his stories for magazines and was paid by the word. Actually, all writers are paid by the word, except for poets, who

generally aren't paid anything at all. Jack had a long-standing agreement with himself to write 1,000 words a day and then he could go and play. He would sail, fight, build, love and drink. At the height of his career, he was used up and worn out. He had just turned 40 when he died.

So there I was, driving along the freeway thinking about writing and drowning—when suddenly, about 100 feet in front of my car, in my lane, two cars collided with such force that they bounced off each other like billiard balls. The car on the left immediately flipped upside down. I could see the driver's wild eyes, his car actually in the air and then I was past. The other car plowed through several cars to the right but my lane was completely clear. I sailed between the wrecks. Not a ping from a shard of glass bounced off my car, but the screeching metal and overwhelming stench of cars skidding across the concrete on their roofs filled my car with the vivid special effects of death and destruction.

I looked in my mirror and saw that only one other car had made it through unscathed. About 45 minutes later, I pulled into the parking lot at Buck's. There was a strange smell lingering in the car but I couldn't place it. Then the eyes of the man who had been in the car that passed me upside down flashed back. My scalp crawled at the image. As I got out of my car, the accident came back to me. I was parked directly at the front door and I reached a shaky hand for the knob and stepped inside. The manager looked at me with alarm and I smiled and strolled over to speak with some friends who were having dinner. Or so they told me later. One of them was a doctor and she thought I was having a seizure or a heart attack. Apparently I was speaking normally, but they said that I looked like I had seen a ghost.

The accident was the most horrific of many I have seen over the years. I blanked it out immediately after it happened. Then my brain fed it back to me in bite-sized chunks until I had it fully reassembled. This took about three days. If there was ever a message from the cosmos, this was it.

But I was still noodling about the writing. I can just see God sitting up on a cloud saying, "Will nothing motivate this guy?"

It took a trip to Jack's grave with Tyler to finally break myself free of my trance and face the beast of self-doubt. Among Jack's disasters was Wolf House. It was a magnificent stone and redwood mansion that he and his wife had spent years building in Glen Ellen, the setting for his novel, *Valley of the Moon*. Just before he and Charmine were to move in, it mysteriously burned down. All that is left today are the skeletal stone walls. Jack is buried under a rock a short walk from the ruins, next to the graves of three pioneer children who died upon their

arrival in California. It is a perfect place to take a leak if you are a dog or a friend of Jack's.

Tyler and I had just visited the small museum that displayed the stuff and stuffing of Jack and Charmine's lives. That's where we read about Jack's thousand words a day. Tyler is a far more prolific writer than I. He records everything in his journals and as we zipped up he said, "So, Dad, why don't you write 1,000 words a day?"

"A thousand? How about five hundred?"

"OK, five hundred," he agreed.

Well, I've been good for the 500 and then some. It isn't supposed to be about quantity but there isn't any quality at all without some quantity, right? Writing a book is like sailing through the sky; eventually it has to come to an end, even if you haven't used half of your propane. Well, finally I started, but how to stop?

Easy: I just had to wait for another sign. I type with two fingers and I'm pretty fast, so I was ripping along when all of sudden my finger slipped under the "K" on the keyboard on my laptop. The key sprung loose and popped up in a broad arc. Like all writers, I waste a good part of each day. I wander around watering the plants, making sure the screws are lined up neatly on the door hinges, combing my hair and tossing treats to my dogs. When the K took off, my ever-vigilant Labrador, Emma, saw it coming and snatched it out of the air and swallowed it neatly. It was clear that this leaky boat had run its course and it was time to head for shore.

This brings me back to Harry.

Harry was growing worse and he knew he wasn't going to make it too much further. He had a phantasmagoria of barns and vaults out in the woods, full of oddities from around the world and an unremarkable little house disguising a massive subterranean facility where a mad scientist would feel right at home running the world. Harry was no hide-about, however, and he frequently had his friends over for fabulous summer parties to play with his dogs and toys.

Which reminds me. You know what the great thing about a dog's life is? The dog doesn't know how it all comes out. As Tom Lehrer says, we will all go: "Every Hottentot and every Eskimo." But Harry pulled a fast one on us. He decided not to wait for the final trumpet to throw his own going-away party. Harry probably ate more cheese than was good for him but what the hell? It was his funeral.

Yeah, it was weird. People laughed and cried, right along with Harry and his family, but he was facing the future and he wasn't alone, just next in line. Harry was pretty rocky but he managed as well as could be expected for a guy who would normally have attended this

hoedown horizontally.

With a disease such as Harry's your circle of life closes in on you bit by bit and you aren't lost all at once. I'd like to tell you that Harry had one more flight at the speed of sound in his beloved F86 and flew out into the sunset and didn't come back. Maybe in the movie we can use this ending but the fact is that he just slipped away from us. Harry didn't squander his life like Jack and he didn't exactly go cheerfully like Socrates, but he did go bravely and he threw one hell of a party.

Oh, did I mention that Harry used to carry a picture of my son and his daughter in his back pocket?



I'd like to thank all the little people

A special thanks to the Sicilians, Russians, lunatics, fanatics and the Icelanders who wanna be them.

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George Leonard, Co-Director of Esalen Institute, writer, humanitarian, and the fellow who coined the term human potential movement, told me years ago I should be a writer and now I 'r' one. Michael Perkins, who was pretty sure I would come up with something someday. Paul Saffo, an early and influential fan.

Marsha BonDurant is responsible for the slick look and put a lot into these pages. Patsy Kahl who convinced me to change the name of the book from *Dick Whipping, Cabin Boy* to the present, much duller, title.

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And my wife Margaret and three boys who average 6'-2" so they really aren't such little people. They put up with me in a big way so thanks and, along with the dogs, you're all still in the will.



About the author



Missy Pendergast is a junior at the University of Puget Sound in Tacoma, Washington. She lives at home with her parents Mel and Helen along with her sisters Kate and Charlotte and their cat Puff.

This is her first novel

RAVES AND COMPLAINTS FOR THE PANCAKE GUY

"I liked what you wrote about me."

Warren Buffett, The smartest man in the world

"I didn't like being referred to as a dirtbag."

Henry Kissinger, Unemployed diplomat

*"Finally! Silicon Valley produces a great literary work!
Jamis is one hell of a writer, and for once I am not kidding."*

Paul Saffo, Director, Institute For the Future

(right to my face)

*"You aren't nearly as good looking as Tyrone Power. Pause
You aren't even as good looking as Noel Coward
and he was a fruit!"*

Zsa Zsa Gabor, Famous person

~~*"I'm basically blurbing this book so I can finally get a table at
Buck's and seem important. But from the few pages I read
this guy is funny. And really weird. It's a good history of the
area that used to be weird and funny and is now geeky and
sad. Is that enough for free pancakes?"*~~

Joel Stein, Time Magazine

"Oh, sure, I'm going to put you through to Dave Barry, HA!"

Rosalina, Temp at the Miami Herald



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